

The Curious Savage Comes to Vonnie Borden Theatre

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“The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.”

Written four centuries ago, these words by John Milton assert a truth about the human condition—people construct their own illusions of reality. On Friday, October 3rd at Vonnie Borden Theatre in Hammond, a production of John Patrick’s *The Curious Savage* reminded us that the human condition is still alive and well. This five-scene, two-act comedy featured the elder widow, Ethel Savage, who is sent to a sanitarium by her greedy stepchildren after she had begun to spend her fortune, and their inheritance, on the realization of deeply held fantasies. To appreciate fully the meaning of such fantasies, one must understand how they surfaced in *The Curious Savage*’s several themes, boisterous characters, and precise use of visual effects.

Let us first visit the several themes. Miss Wilhelmina and Dr. Emmett proved that people with true character cannot be bought off. The stepchildren humorously show that greed and self-absorbedness can distort one’s view of rational behavior. Ethel shows the importance of fulfilling deeply held, but seemingly insignificant, fantasies. And fantasies bring us to the theme most relevant to the writer—that the mind will create illusions to escape the fear of life and its many dangers. The characters described herein are examples of this tendency to resort to illusion.

Whitney Allen portrayed the attention-craving Fairy May with such an exactness that I wondered where Miss Allen ends and Miss May begins. Boisterous entrances and exits, compulsive lying, and other attention-grabbing gestures by Allen were well-communicated, and fitting for a character whose illusion of reality was that she is a princess, the fairest damsel in

The Cloisters ward, and perhaps even abroad. But “Miss Cloisters 1950” undoubtedly uses illusion to avoid coming to terms with her inner conflict of true self-discovery and purposely ignores reality and its consequences in the process. The way she and the other “Cloisterians” disapprove of reading newspapers is proof of this intent.

Another character in a dreamland is Mrs. Paddy, played funnily by Marcy Jarreau, whose rants on the things she hated (especially on electricity and politicians) put me in tears of laughter. Easy to recognize is Paddy’s problem, hatred of the world and everything in it, and just as simple is noticing the fantasy she uses to escape her hatred—that she is a spectacular painter of seascapes. However, one glance at her paintings told the audience that her hobby is a self-deluding hoax, just as one glance at the activities of the other Cloisterians revealed their own fantasies. Underneath the rough exterior of Paddy lied a woman much like Fairy May—somehow hurt by the world, afraid to confront the pain and, instead, reduced to masquerade at the easel.

Along with Fairy’s flighty fantasy and Paddy’s painting is the illusion of Ethel Savage: the surprising Teddy Bear. Kay Butler rendered a perfect Ethel: witty, humorous, and out to prove a point. In addition to these qualities, *The Curious Savage* is quite sane and in touch with reality. But the Teddy, along with its most obvious function, still stands as a symbol of how the human mind can fool itself into comfort despite the absence of someone to love.

The final ingredient for understanding the theme of fantasy in *The Curious Savage* was the use of visual effects. Mrs. Paddy turns out the lights early to establish herself as one to do such a thing, creating a logical precedent for the more important scene in which Miss Willhelmina steals and hides Ethel’s bonds. This switching off of the lights speaks loudly to the theme of illusion. First, Paddy hates electricity (and everything else), and consequently, she turns

out the lights. Without light, one cannot fully experience the things one hates so much. Thus, the lack of light is merely a symbol of the self-delusion in Paddy and the other guests. And the last scene in which Ethel sees the Cloisterians as they see themselves—in the spotlight, unaware of their lack of light (or true vision of reality)—uses the effect of darkness to bring closure to Mrs. Ethel and to the audience.

To appreciate fully the human tendency to resort to illusion as escape from the harshness of reality, one must understand how this tendency surfaced in *The Curious Savage*'s several themes, boisterous characters, and precise use of visual effects. Each character proves that humans, by nature, will do just about anything to protect themselves from the true pains of life and to avoid uncertainty. So John Milton was correct: the mind is its own place. What Ethel teaches us, finally, with her Teddy and tenacity, is that, more often than not, we strive to make a heaven of hell. And that's certainly the better alternative.

Works Cited

Bartlett, J., & Kaplan, J (Ed.). (2002). *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* (17th ed.). New York: Little Brown & Company.

The Curious Savage (3 October 2003). Southeastern Louisiana University Drama Company.

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Ms. Hue's Comments: *Heath's paper was a superior example of a theatrical critique. His written work was carefully and sensitively approached and executed.*