

Last updated at 8:50 AM on 31/03/08

Another fine performance wraps up drama festival

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Special to The Telegram

The 58th Provincial Drama Festival wrapped up on Saturday night at Gander's Arts and Culture Centre with Nicolas Billon's "The Elephant Song" presented by The Beothuck Street Players of St. John's.

Psychiatrist Dr. Lawrence has vanished from the insane asylum. The last person known to have spoken with him is his 20-year-old patient Michael (James MacDonald). Despite repeated cautions from Nurse Peterson (Bev Doyle) hospital director Dr. Greenburg (Bruce Doulton) is determined to get to the bottom of things with the incredibly intelligent, though deeply disturbed and manipulative Michael.

The ensuing interrogation touches on sexual abuse, opera, murder, and elephants (one of Michael's bizarre obsessions). Not only was this the second presentation of a Canadian play in as many nights, it was also the second three-hander.

"The Elephant Song" was first produced at Stratford in 2004, when its author, Nicolas Billon, was only 26 years of age. Audiences have come to expect fine performances from the Beothuck Street Players, and on Saturday night they did not disappoint. We were treated to a visually pleasing and tightly acted production.

From our first glimpse of the well constructed set, we were drawn in to this psychological thriller and kept off balance until the shocking and haunting conclusion.

The real star of this play was young James MacDonald. He gave a knockout performance as the troubled Michael. He was both intelligent and articulate, handling the rapid-fire dialog like a pro. While evil at times, he won our total sympathy and compassion. There is much talent in this young man which augurs well for the future.

Bruce Doulton's Dr. Greenburg was suitably clueless and tightly wound. He was the quintessential administrator. While perhaps a little slow getting into her part, Bev Doyle was a convincing head nurse, with real tenderness for her patient.

Sound and lighting were first rate, and the use of projection was an effective touch.

Adjudicator Aiden Flynn was visibly moved by the powerful drama. All week long we have seen the troupes demonstrate their deep commitment to community theatre, and this was "a perfect way to end it". He was quick to acknowledge and thank the organizing committee of the festival for a job well done.

And it was a wonderful festival. Theatre lovers will have to wait until Apr. 13, 2009 to enjoy the 59th Provincial Drama Festival which will be hosted by the Carol Players of Labrador West.

There is no doubt that community theatre, and the arts in general are a valued part of life in Newfoundland and Labrador.

We are indeed fortunate to have facilities like our Arts and Culture Centres to produce and enjoy the rich offerings to which audiences were treated this week. However, in spite of valiant efforts by centre staff to do the best they can with what they've got, it is patently obvious that it is time to renovate and refurbish these aging buildings. Perhaps the Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation could get a share of all that oil money. And perhaps they could start at the bottom as it were, with the seats.

Spending upwards of two to three hours a night for five nights sitting in one of these seats just might send me off to my friendly neighbourhood chiropractor.