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Flying high

MSU's 'Cuckoo's Nest' defies expectations**by Paul Wozniak**

For the rest of this week, Michigan State University acting instructor Rob Roznowski is helming this richly complicated story of the fight for independence and humanity in a 1960s mental institution.

If he wanted, MSU's production of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" could simply be an incredible showcase of technical talents, from set to costumes to makeup to lighting to sound design. But Roznowski pushes his cast members beyond the safety of some of their previous roles, giving them a chance to explore the depths of their psyches and display their findings on stage. For the audience, it's exciting to see some souls as bare as the Pasant Theatre's walls.

Rob Odorisio's set design contrasts the film version's white sterile space with one of deteriorating dark greens and browns incorporated into hospital pull-curtains. The curtains perform not only as room separators but also as scrim. A Plexiglas-enclosed nurses' station stands directly in front of a section of seats, but it also helps bring the action closer to the audience, as the cast hides in or breaks into the tower filled with depressive pills and music.

The set is perfectly complimented by Matt Reynolds' lighting design, with its light that pierces through the foggy windows as the sun rises, isolating spotlights and additional lights hidden in virtually every part of the very exposed set. Special mention should be given to the long list of lighting and scenic technicians who never miss a cue in a play that includes many.

Karen Kangas-Preston has designed incredible prosthetics for burn victims, as well as period appropriate hospital garments that subtly separate the pressed white staff from the wrinkled, dirty patients.

Even sound designer Giffin Moon goes the extra mile, with voice-overs of Chief Bromden's nightmares and sickly sweet instrumental renditions of pop songs throughout the decades.

But it is the cast of MSU students whose performances give the technical elements their purpose.

Alex B. West plays the untamed and virile Randle P. McMurphy, a free-living, lazy conman who convinces the judge to send him to a mental institution instead of a work camp. West owes virtually none of his performance to Jack Nicholson's iconic onscreen portrayal, but he charismatically holds the stage with a performance that clearly demonstrates his understanding of this complex, symbolic character.

Marla Carter portrays the controlling and deplorable Nurse Ratched with biting sincerity. While Carter consistently fills her passive aggressive character with subtle malevolence, she sometimes substitutes verbal speed for precision. Her haste ultimately prevents some lines from finding their mark for a deeper stab.

McMurphy's gang of more mentally competent inmates consists of effeminate leader Dale Harding (Jon Wierenga), the stuttering and sexually repressed Billy Bibbit (Hazen Cuyler), Scanlon (Niel Powell), the twitchy Cheswick (Tyler VanCamp) and the hallucinogenic Martini (Jason Garvey). As inter-dependent as their characters are on each other, each actor crafts three-dimensional personas that allow their ticks and outbursts to serve as metaphor for their struggles instead of a comic shtick. It is enjoyable to watch these actors share their energy while giving each other time to share the spotlight.

Andrew Faber gives the most natural performance of the cast as pragmatic supervisor Dr. Spivey, a man whose lack of agenda continually conflicts with Nurse Ratched's sinister motives. Lacking the independent thought of Dr. Spivey are the aggressive aides Warren and Williams, marvelously played by Lucas H. Daniels and Tom Brennan. Warren and Williams move like conditioned attack dogs awaiting the command of their master, Ratched, to devour the patients like red meat. The target of most of their unleashed abuse is Chief Bromden, played with pulsing reserve by Michael Schuler. Schuler only hides his face beneath his dark wig, as his motivations, fears and strength are always visible.

With a cast that includes strong cameos, walk-ons and general institutional scenery, "Cuckoo" provides a constant feast for the senses but not for those with a weak stomach or too vivid of an imagination.

'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest'**By Dale Wasserman, adapted from the novel by Ken Kesey****8 p.m. Friday & Saturday****2 p.m. Sunday****Pasant Theatre, Wharton Center****\$10/\$15****1 (800) WHARTON****www.whartoncenter.com****www.theatre.msu.edu**