

Death in Bowengabbie Takes Audiences to a Dying Town Full of Dying People

by Barry Lenny



This is one of those plays about a person returning home to a small country town after an extended absence. In this case he is Oscar, an architect, with his wedding to Ruth imminent, and a major assignment in Dubai to go to. After fifteen years away he is brought home to Bowengabbie by a death in the family, his Aunt Jeannie choked on a melon ball, to discover a town that is slowly fading away. This is the all too real plight of many small country towns as the young folk head to the cities for work, study, and careers, never to return.

His family once ran a very successful jam making business, employing many of the townsfolk, but all that remains of the business now is a hole where the factory once stood, and trees laden with fruit that will feed the birds or fall to the ground to rot. Oscar is keen to get back to the city but, with an aging population, he finds himself returning several more times in quick succession to attend the funerals of Uncle Harry, Aunt Maggie and

more. The townspeople celebrate each life at its closing, turning the funerals into a string of themed parties.

He also runs into Gary, an obnoxious opportunist buying up the businesses of the deceased for next to nothing to extend his original business, a fish and chip shop, ludicrously named Vision Chips. Gary is also chasing Abbie, the girl next door when Oscar was young, but Oscar feels an attraction to her as well.

Death in Bowengabbie, written by Caleb Lewis, is a one man show starring Elliott Howard as Oscar, the architect, and all of the other major and minor characters, including the pet Tasmanian Devil, Rasputin. Yes, it is indeed a black comedy, with absurdist overtones. Lewis has a poetic quality to his writing, which he couples with an extensive vocabulary, and the director, **Peter Green**, uses this to good effect.

The clever set, a miniature main street of aging buildings, made from cardboard boxes that quickly transform into grave stones, works well, with no disruption of the flow of the narrative, and the lighting design, by that in demand man, Stephen Dean, is beautifully subtle and atmospheric. technically, this is a very coherent piece.

And so to the work of Elliott Howard, and what a superb job he does in bringing Oscar, and the many others, off of the page and into life on the stage. The intimate Bakehouse Theatre means that nobody is very far from him, and this close proximity adds to the feeling of being confided in as he unfolds his tale. He is Oscar, the narrator or storyteller, and Oscar the character, with a small shift that made it always clear which he was at any time. He showed his versatility and imagination in creating Gary and Abbie, people of his own age, through to Pop, his grandfather, and a host of others, switching to and fro accurately between them in a moment.

This production takes a very well written play and, with great direction, acting, and technical work, turns it into a satisfying and highly engaging performance. If one was really picky it might be suggested that at a couple of touching moment the pace could have slowed a little more and made use of pauses, but that a very minor quibble. In the end, it is a production that is easy to recommend and sure to please anybody. Get along to see this one.