

'Affluenza!' earns its blessings

Show has good timing,
steady rhyming and
top-notch writing

By ROBERT TRUSSELL
The Kansas City Star

The idea was bold: Write a modern comedy in rhyming verse in the tradition of Moliere.

Shouldn't have worked. Should've been a train wreck. It was a crazy idea. As it turns out, however, James Sherman's "Affluenza!" is an impressive piece of work — a witty balancing act that gets laughs from age-old human foibles as well as our present age of untrammelled corporate greed.

The well-acted production at the American Heartland Theatre — only the third staging of this play — brings the material to life in a way that reveals the writing for what it is: fresh, creative and richly comic.

There are stretches, as you might expect, when Sherman can't quite keep the machine running at full throttle, but for the most part the show's novelty works in its favor. Director Mark Ciglar stages the action at a crisp pace with a cast that handles the complicated dialogue almost flawlessly. Kudos to the Heartland for trying something different.

Sherman borrows from a range of playwrights, Moliere being the most obvious, to construct a contemporary plot employing archetypes that have their roots in classical comedy: a wealthy man in his dotage, a worthless son awaiting his inheritance, a scheming coquette who tricks the old man into marriage, a naïve nephew in love with the new wife, an ex-spouse with still-active designs on his fortune and a loyal servant who sees through all of the chicanery and Machiavellian moves.

Perhaps the most successfully realized character is Jerome, the son who

REVIEW

"Affluenza!"

Where: American Heartland Theatre

When: Wednesday, Jan. 12
(runs through Feb. 20)

Attendance: 200 (approx.)

Tickets: \$16-\$31.50 ; (816) 842-9999

buys compulsively from eBay and dreams of engineering Enron-like corporate fraud. Sean Grennan's excellent performance is so grounded in reality that Jerome's most preposterous behavior has the ring of truth. And that makes it all the more amusing.

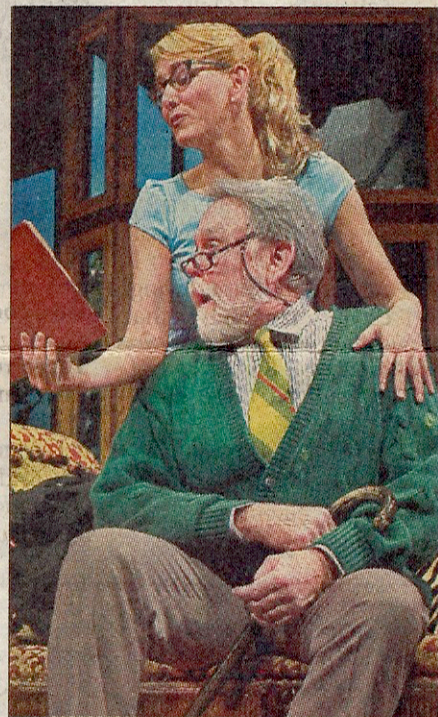
Veteran player Kip Niven brings his customary skill to the role of William, the patriarch who falls for the manipulative Dawn, played competently by Jennifer James Bradshaw in a workmanlike performance.

As Eugene, the sexually inexperienced nephew, Martin English sometimes falls into his manic mode, although he makes a nice straight man to Grennan's antics.

Merle Moores brings focus and specificity to the role of Ruth, the ex-wife. And Elijah Murray turns in what in many ways is the most interesting performance as Bernard, who functions as a kind of manservant/valet/butler. Bernard, whom the script requires to be African-American, figures into the plot's climax in an important way and helps provide the play with its moral underpinnings.

And that's really the point. Comedy in the Moliere tradition only really works if the writer turns an unforgiving eye on the failures of his own class.

What Sherman accomplishes is pretty remarkable. This is a play that generates no shortage of laughs with humor that can be sophisticated or crude, but it also stands as a blistering indictment



Dawn, played by Jennifer James Bradshaw, woos William Moore, played by Kip Niven, in "Affluenza!"

of the values of the ruling class.

In the final minutes of the play, William, by now fed up with the feverish competition to claim his fortune, delivers an angry, beautifully written speech condemning the assembled plutocrats and their hollow values that have turned the country into one enormous shopping mall.

Through the years I've come to expect certain things from the Heartland, mainly laughs and spirited musical performances. I don't necessarily expect to encounter a play that makes me think.

But that's what "Affluenza!" does. Once you see it, you'll have trouble getting it out of your head.

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