

‘Savage’ brutal, but never static at Notre Dame

Review

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SOUTH BEND — The University of Notre Dame’s production of John Patrick Shanley’s “Savage in Limbo” may be brutal but it’s anything but static.

Under Siiri Scott’s direction, the production’s five actors inhabited their characters with visceral physicality and emotional honesty for Monday’s opening-night performance at the DeBartolo Center for the Performing Arts.

Shanley sets “Savage in Limbo” in an unnamed, rundown bar in the Bronx where the play’s five 32-year-old characters meet one Monday night for an evening of soul searching, fighting and, for some, reconciliation.

As the play begins, the bartender, Murk (Robert Hannum), pours drinks for April White (Margaret Janiczek), a failed nun who can’t afford her bar tab and who has only just woken from sleeping off a few on the bar. Denise Savage (Carolyn Rose Sullivan) enters, intent upon losing her virginity, and is soon joined by Linda Rotunda (Megan O’Donoghue), whose boyfriend, Tony Aronica (Nathaniel Grams), has just broken up with her so that he can date “ugly girls” — smart girls, that is.

Once Tony arrives, most of the action revolves around him, Linda and Denise — and Grams, O’Donoghue and Sullivan give superb performances as three people who want to throw off the shackles of their lives but who can’t answer Denise’s question to Tony: “What are you going to change to?”

Scott paces the production well so that the characters’ actions have an urgent undercurrent to them, as if this is the only night of their lives when they might glimpse an answer to that question.

Grams, O’Donoghue and Sullivan, in particular, take that urgency and escalate the tension between their characters and play off each other naturally and effectively.

Sullivan displays good comedic timing with her several humorous lines, and when she explains Denise’s virginity, she’s physically wound up, speaking as much through nervous movements as through words. The character’s intellectual and emotional frustrations come through in Sullivan’s delivery and her often clenched body language.

When Denise finally cracks, Sullivan plays it just a hair too melodramatically, but much of “Savage in Limbo” invites such acting, and this is only a moment within an otherwise engaging performance.

O’Donoghue pulls the audience into Linda’s description of Tony’s breakup speech with her dramatic delivery, and elicits several laughs for her delivery of jabs aimed at Sullivan’s Denise. O’Donoghue makes Linda’s extreme variations in emotion credible and gives the character a sense of determination and self-awareness that makes Linda sympathetic and never as desperate as Denise.

Grams has a powerful presence onstage — physically, vocally and emotionally. The frustration Tony feels comes through in his explanation of why he wants to leave Linda, but so does the self-serving nature of that decision on a subliminal level. Confusion and assurance play through Grams’ performance like alternating, blinking lights.

Hannum plays Murk as a forceful but bored observer, except when Murk must comfort April when she lapses into the memory of her mother’s death. Hannum subtly conveys an oily form of compassion there, more enabling and controlling than loving.

The slightly built Janiczek practically makes April disappear at times, which fits for a character who spends much of the play slumped unconscious on the bar. When April does come alive, Janiczek plays her effectively as a shattered person, more an emotional child than an adult who even winces when the others yell. Janiczek delivers April’s one line of insight — “I can’t knock myself out enough” — with a real degree of desperation.

Set designer Marcus Stephens’ set is as off-kilter as the actors’ performances are true, and it makes for a perfect environment for the characters. Placed off-center and pitched at an angle that slopes toward the audience, the set redefines the term “dive” in its depiction of this bar. Dead plants provide decoration, portions of the walls are missing, windows are broken or cracked, and light comes from a single bare bulb hung from exposed wires. The tables are dirty, the chairs worn and the bar’s finish gone.

You wouldn’t want to be a regular at this bar, but you should stop in for “Savage in Limbo” while it plays through Friday night at DeBartolo.