Solo staging brings forth multilayered storytelling

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News Critic

Studio Arena Theatre is a big place with a big stage and, many might think, not particularly suitable for the intimacy demanded by a one-person play.

The many would be wrong. The opening night performance Friday of Studio Arena's first venture into solo performance - Jay O'Callahan's "Pouring the Sun" and "Pill Hill Stories" - was a joy and a triumph.

O'Callahan, a marvelous and infinitely subtle storyteller creates his own intimacy. He appears on the darkened stage framed by a trapezium of light on the floor and accompanied by a few spare articles of furniture. An unvarying back-projected image, one appropriate to each act, gently, unobtrusively indicates the world beyond O'Callahan's words. (Chris Noble and John Saunders, scenic designer and light designer, respectively, are responsible for this effective visual focusing.)

Beyond that, it is simply a man talking to us.

And what beautiful, affecting talk. "Pouring the Sun" is the story of a Polish family that "worked the steel" in Bethlehem, Pa., from the 1920s to the 1950s in the days before unions made a hard life a bit more bearable. O'Callahan wisely filters this family saga through a single character, Ludvika Moskal, an immigrant woman who came to this country alone when she was 18 and is hardened by the tough life in a steelmaking city.

O'Callahan's Ludvika is a woman of full, melancholy-tinged emotion, who with each new tragedy becomes a stronger and more resourceful person. At first, when she's still a young girl barely making her way in this grim and unfriendly environment, she sends bitter letters to her parents back in Poland. Then she meets Fritz, a worker in Machine Shop No. 2 who plays beautiful Chopin, and she becomes a makeshift romantic poet. "He's giving me a wedding present - the moon!" she writes to her mother. "But I'm leaving it up there for you."

After she and Fritz are married and the kids come, one tragedy follows another. Because of the cruelty of his plant boss, Fritz loses three fingers and his beloved Chopin. The oldest son, Alex - so good at football "they put him in the front row" (Fritz brags) - wins a college scholarship, a dream in a family that can only hope that its children might finish high school. But a 25-cent bet is made by one of Alex's friends that results in a horrible accident, and the dream becomes a nightmare.

Under the strain of life, Ludvika, still surging with her youthful emotion, becomes a pragmatist. She can sometimes be harsh and, when it comes to the welfare of her family, always relentless. Fritz can only follow in her wake. "Let me have my say, and then you can yell at me, Ludvika" is this constant refrain.

The way O'Callahan does it, this is great and moving stuff, filled with picturesque but never maudlin snapshots of these struggling lives. Fritz and Ludvika are rendered with remarkable vividness, and soon the steady and wise Alex comes booming to life. His brother, John, is sharply drawn as a courageous individual who draws on his mother's strength and, against all odds, wins the unionist battle. His sister, Mary, and the youngest, Freddie, slip in and out as lively aside.

In a perfect complement to Ludvika's poignant, broadly human story are the three selections from O'Callahan's "Pill Hill Stories." These are humorous, lighter autobiographical stories that tell of O'Callahan's youth growing up in a Boston neighborhood, called Pill Hill for all its doctors.

These stories - different selections will be alternated throughout the run - are essentially tales of eccentrics or odd adventures from a hyperactive childhood. One memorable character is Mrs. Lawrence, a literature-mongering do-gooder who wants to impart culture to the neighborhood children. She has them over for "Cookies and Dickens" - O'Callahan thought Dickens was some kind of ice cream - or more hilariously, to serve as the chorus, junior division, in her readings from "Electra."

Director Richard McElvain, who has worked with O'Callahan for many years, writes in the program that O'Callahan is that special kind of performer not subject to the kind of direction you might aim at an actor. Instead of guidance in all the ins and outs of stage business, McElvain says, you only need plant a seed or two and then watch them grow as the intuitive O'Callahan turns them into "creations that are as surprising as they are deeply moving or funny."

You can see this intuitive process convincingly at work in this performance. That's mainly because O'Callahan doesn't desert his storytelling roots to merely play a part. Though at times he sounds like a sane Robin Williams, he keeps all characterizations to a minimum. And only occasionally does he resort to mime-like illustrational maneuvers, as when he imitates Ludvika's peeling phantom potatoes for her famous potato soup.

But what he does do, and very effectively so, is generously engage some of the archetypal storytelling devices. With consummate skill, he uses age-old gestures and movements that must have generated wonder in listeners even since that first human stumbled into the cave and started telling about his close encounter with the local saber-toothed tiger.

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