



Great acting enlivens Theatre Three's 'Language of Angels'

By Lawson Taitte

Theater

ltaitte@dallasnews.com

Published 13 May 2011 11:22 PM

Whatever you wind up thinking of Naomi Iizuka's *Language of Angels*, you'll be astonished by the acting going on in Theatre Three's basement.

You can't really call the play a meditation on death. By the end of the 90-minute script, reviewed Friday, there's hardly anyone left to meditate. Even before the action starts, a character (discussed but never seen) has already perished before her time. Only a couple of the others hang on till the end.

They start out as Carolina teenagers who go into remote caves to party. One night, a girl, Celie (Jessica Renee Russell) disappears into the depths and is never seen again. Only, some say, you can hear her voice calling if you venture up into the mountains.

Iizuka structures her play into three distinct sections. (Those who get frustrated by all the jumping around in time at the start can take heart. It gets more conventional as it goes along.)

At first, four of the characters address the audience in monologues, looking back from a certain remove. Seth (Montgomery Sutton) so mourns Celie that he's a broken, desperate man. Kendra (Hilary Couch) has handled the pain by getting away — but even living 1,000 miles north, she's haunted. J.B. (Clay Yocum), the sheriff's son who eventually becomes sheriff himself, is both aggressive and defensive, as if he has something to hide.

After a transition, four new performers obsess over a later death — that of a young man who fell off the side of a mountain. Danielle (Aleisha Force), who was his girlfriend, has picked up a stranger, Michael (Ryan Martin). His best friend, Billy (Clayton Wheeler), bullies both his girlfriend, Allison (Kelsey Craig), and the newcomer.

In a long, subtle final scene, J.B., now aging and ailing, looks up Danielle, who has finally put aside drink and drugs and seems, if not at peace, at least cautiously stable.

Director Jeffrey Schmidt's actors are all superb, but the most assured performances anchor the beginning and the end. Sutton, who has proved himself around here in Shakespeare, demonstrates he's just as good at hillbilly angst. Couch beautifully shows the dread under Kendra's poise. Yocum returns to form as a heavy with soul, and Force lets us see her character with remarkable clarity at three or four stages of her life, morphing from vibrant (if troubled) to a mountain woman old before her time.

Schmidt designed the set himself, conjuring up cavern walls merely with textures of cloth. Paul Arnold lights the darkness in all kinds of unconventional ways, and Newton Pittman's original score and sound design are alternately scary and haunting.

Plan your life

Through June 5 at Theatre Three at the Quadrangle, 2800 Routh St. Runs 90 mins. \$25 to \$30. 214-871-3300, www.theatre3dallas.com.