

THEATER REVIEW

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## Loose ends undo promising 'Ribbons'

By Gina Perille, Globe Correspondent | July 20, 2005

The fresh and savvy 11:11 Theatre Company certainly belongs on the watch list as a creator of interesting theater in Boston, but the Boston premiere of Brian Tuttle's "Yellow Ribbons" contains too many unwatchable moments to be heralded as a strong play. "Yellow Ribbons" has tremendous conviction and depth, but rather than build emotionally, its high-strung dialogue tends to chafe. Some judicious trimming would ratchet up the meaningfulness and reduce the meandering.

"Yellow Ribbons" focuses on the relationship between older brother Dom (Greg Maraio) and younger brother Bryce (Tuttle) on the night before Dom's wedding. Because of their parents' shortcomings, Dom has served as an unswerving, nearly obsessively focused caretaker and protector of Bryce for many years. When Bryce turns up after having gone missing for a week, the brothers' emotions explode as they try to balance their happiness at seeing each other with their frustration over why they may have to part again.

Tuttle writes dialogue with twisted reverence for the styles of Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett. When characters aren't moving about in bleak, extended pauses, they're emoting with overlapping half sentences, a technique that isn't executed effectively and tends to stall the progression of the play.

Tuttle also appears to have a love-hate relationship with exposition, failing to establish character identities clearly in the early dialogue or even in the program. But then there are veritable explosions of back story that tumble from the mouths of supporting characters. Dom's fiancée, Marilyn (Eliza Lay), has a particularly clunky speech about what she's pieced together about Dom and Bryce's childhood. Tuttle's script also struggles to bring the title to life. The way yellow ribbons are introduced into the dialogue is among the least authentic, most anticlimactic moments in the play.

Director David Gothard keeps the ensemble focused, and the actors are quite talented in their own right. The three men in the ensemble are particularly easy to watch, each embodying his character in a distinct way. Maraio produces a range of emotions -- and eerie physical ticks -- as the short-fused Dom. Tuttle plays the more overtly vulnerable Bryce with great sensitivity, capturing the way he ricochets between feeling lost and feeling determined. And Morgan Zobel is entertaining as Zachary, the none-too-devout minister and outside observer of the household's late-night cacophony, all of which takes place in the spare room and closet of the brothers' home.

The two female roles are less impressive due to a combination of underdeveloped writing and disruptive performance choices by the actresses. Leslie Koppenhaver plays Bryce's girlfriend Ashley, a screechy character who borders on pointless.

Tuttle writes the two central characters best, and Gothard stages the exchanges of their complex relationship with great creativity. But even with a compelling core story and a handful of skilled actors, "Yellow Ribbons" needs to have some of its loose ends tightened up to succeed. ■