

Death, bitterness ... It's comedy, right?

By CHRISTOPHER POTTER
NEWS ARTS WRITER

To laugh or not to laugh? That is the question with Harold Pinter's "Moonlight," opening Thursday courtesy of the Brass Tacks Ensemble at Riverside Arts Center.

One of Pinter's longest and most verbose plays, this 1993 puzzler offers a skitish portrait of a discombobulated family.

PREVIEW

Patriarch Andy (played by Rob Sulewski) is on his deathbed, though it's never specified what he's dying of. Wife Bel (Anne Rhoades) sits patiently near her husband's bed, offering comments often more cutting than kindly.

In a nondescript room nearby, the couple's estranged-adult sons Jake and Fred engage in near-patter-songs of nonsensical riffing. Meantime, Andy and Bel's married friends Ralph and Maria (James Ingagiola and Amy Kullenberg) offer "comfort" by confirming that each has been adulterous with the other's mate.

All the while, Andy and Bel's 16-year-old daughter Bridget (Michelle Mirkin) wanders about the stage and through the play like a ghost, offering an eerie prologue and epilogue. Of all the play's reams of dialogue, only Bridget's lack of absurdity or bitterness, as if she resides in another dimension.

Which indeed she does, suggests Ingagiola, who is directing "Moonlight" as well as acting in it. "We're working under the assumption that Bridget is dead," he says. "But we don't want to make a lot of assumptions, because that's always a dangerous thing to do when it comes to Pinter."

Certainly a mere read-through of "Moonlight" can leave one limp with laughter, as its characters prattle on and on, often in platitudes that sound like they've been filched from a zillion gaseous speeches:

"All his life my father has been subjected to hatred and vituperation. He has been from time immemorial pursued and persecuted by a malignant force which until this day has remained shadowy, a force resisting definition



Joshua Messer, Michelle Mirkin and Patrick Morgan in the Brass Tacks Ensemble production 'Moonlight,' opening tonight at Riverside Arts Center.

or classification. What is its force and what is its bent? You will answer that question, not I."

Sometimes the dialogue careens into pure nonsense exchanges as though delivered by a comic stage duo:

"I once lived the life of Riley myself.

What was he like?

I never met him personally. But I became a very, very close friend of the woman he ran away with."

Yet "Moonlight" must be more than farce. After all, one man lies dying and it seems his daughter, who lacks her kin's hatred and vitriol, passed into another dimension years earlier.

"Certainly 'Moonlight' is very funny when you're reading or watching it," Ingagiola says. "But once it's over, you're liable to take a step

back and realize how sterile these lives are. "I think the beautiful thing about the play is that it's Pinter's most emotional work. It's also his play about families and death — and the notion that death is not a bad thing. Bridget is already dead, but she doesn't appear to be in any torment. She's walking, searching through fields of flowers. And she's the only one who truly cares. The others all talk around the things that are troubling them. They're really talking about nothing."

The Brass Tacks Ensemble presents "Moonlight" tonight through Sunday and Feb. 8-11 at Riverside Arts Center, 76 N. Huron St. in Ypsilanti. Curtain is 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays. Tickets are \$12 general, \$9 students/seniors. For reservations, call (734) 741-4826.

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