

Entertainment » Theatre

The Charitable Sisterhood of the Second Trinity Victory Church

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Stephanie Crowley, Ambera De Lash, Jennifer Tipton, Lisa Burton, Caley Suliak

In "The Charitable Sisterhood of the Second Trinity Victory Church" at the Dragon Theatre, five women in a church basement get stranded by a storm, although maybe they turn out to have been stranded in some less literal way already.

That's the takeaway from this 2014 comedy by Bo Wilson, in which a charity drive in small town Virginia turns into a mystery of sorts, and eventually, a dilemma as the ladies may have to turn one of their own over to a potentially grim fate.

Lisa Burton is the busybody pastor's wife with an uptight attitude and possibly a few skeletons in her closet. Ambera De Lash plays a Jezebel from Georgia whose Scarlett O'Hara accent sounds so light it needs to be tethered down. Jennifer Tipton is the Yankee

transplant, eager to please.

To be honest, of all of these characters the only one that really keeps things rolling is Stephanie Crowley as the everywoman mother of nine (or ten -- the headcount varies) with the salty sense of humor and the wit not to take things too seriously.

Crowley at least is fun to be around, whereas the others come off as a bit of a drag with whom to spend time. And spend time we do, as the altruistic assembly gathers at the church to sort out charity drive donations and end up isolated by flooding.

There's also one other sister who shouldn't be there: Riley, a drifter (Canadian actor Caley Suliak) whose sudden appearance poses a parish problem, although the exact nature of that conflict strays into spoiler territory.

In fact, we can't even give Suliak the praise she deserves for her patience on making her first big entrance, as that would also spoil a surprise. Life's not fair sometimes.

"Charitable Sisterhood" has a bad habit of giving out spoilers of its own, though. For example, the very first scene, in which the lights come up, and the cast almost stumbles into the ramshackle pile of donated goods that looms at the back of the stage like a tipsy monster, would be a great surprise if the audience hadn't already seen the mess before the show starts.

(Points to set and props guy Christopher Fitzer for assembling an impressive-looking pile.)

There's no way around that, but it's still a missed opportunity. Wilson's script telegraphs some of the jokes too. Before Burton busts in, the other sisters anticipate precisely what she'll say and do upon arrival, and then she goes ahead and does it. It's supposed to be amusing but feels redundant.

Once surprises do start piling up, "Charitable Sisters" takes a turn for the pretty goofy. Stuff gets laid on rather thick here, and while details like the presence of a Scooby-Doo lunchbox and the intrusion of a radio DJ who seems touched in the head suggest this is supposed to be tongue-in-cheek, it doesn't feel that way.

The tongue-in-cheek vibe also wars with a deathly serious one as the play goes on. The tension of the situation prods everyone in the cast to start divulging deep, dark secrets on cue, and while Suliak and Tipton, in particular, pour very candid emotion into the confessions, the fact that they all pile up right in a row one after another seems contrived.

In another disappointment, the ultimate solution to everyone's problem turns out to be just the original, obvious course of action but performed with more empathy and a rather surprising degree of trust that American institutions will back victimized women when they really need it.

That's nice and all, but it can't help but seem superficial in the face of the heavy duty social evils "Charitable Sisters" glances at.

Maybe director Cindy Powell just wasn't able to corner the show's mercurial spirit, although it seems more likely that the fault is Wilson's play in the first place.

"The Charitable Sisterhood of the Second Trinity Victory Church" runs through June 4 at the Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway in Redwood City. For tickets and information, call 650-493-2006 or visit DragonProductions.net.

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