

Melville Boys' serious second half a jarring contrast to first act's humour

By Adrian Chamberlain, timescolonist.com
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What: The Melville Boys
Where: Langham Court Theatre
Rating: Three stars (out of five)

Canada's answer to Neil Simon is Norm Foster, one of the country's most popular and prolific playwrights. Foster's comedies are easy to digest and replete with snappy one-liners, in the manner of TV sitcoms.

The Victoria Theatre Guild has reprised a lively version Foster's play *The Melville Boys* — his best and most popular effort. Certainly, Thursday's opening-night performance was well-received. There's definitely fun afoot here, although some of the acting was overly broad. Overall, the production — directed by Tony Cain — does work and will no doubt please Foster fans and devotees of light theatre.

First staged in 1984, Foster's comedy is about two brothers who visit the family's lakeside cabin. Owen, the younger, is ebullient, fun-loving and irresponsible (in a mostly lovable way). Lee is introspective and a bit dour. However, we learn there's good reason for his melancholy: He's been diagnosed with a terminal disease.

The intended weekend of male bonding is livened by the arrival of two gals in a boat. These young women are, in some ways, a reflection of the brothers. Loretta is a brash, selfish good-time gal who believes her starring roles in cheesy TV commercials will fast-track her to stardom. The more thoughtful and likable sister is Mary, a pleasant woman who's yet to recover from her husband's abandonment several years previously.

At Owen's insistence, the four attend a dance. When they return to the cabin that night, enlivened by dinner and drinks, considerable shenanigans ensue.

Like Simon, Foster is a skilled craftsman who knows how to create amusing situations. These are mostly — but not always — setups for funny lines. Yes, we laugh, yet there is a feeling that we're being prodded and pushed a little (just as we are when we watch *Two and a Half Men* or *The Big Bang Theory*). Some might find it manipulative, although there's no denying it's clever.

The big difference between the average TV romp and *The Melville Boys* is the unavoidable shadow cast by Lee's illness. His brother's reluctance to face up to this — and accept his own responsibilities in the situation — leads to a dramatic face-off in Act II. This soul-searching scene gives the play grit and some depth, although one wishes Foster might have explored elements of this drama in the first act, too. The play seems a tad off balance.

Ben Sutherland came close to stealing the show. A young dude in a cowboy hat and matching boots, he came off as a combination of Paul Newman's Hud and one of the cuter members in a

boy band. Sutherland, 21, possesses a raw talent and a cocky ability to coax laughs. More attention might be paid to ensuring his character isn't lost amid the swaggers and the knowing grins.

Brittany Drew, playing raucous Loretta, approaches her role with similar gusto. Again, it seemed subtleties that make even a broadly drawn character interesting were glossed over in favour of a enthusiastic exploration of Loretta's audaciousness.

More attention might have been paid to the production's overall tone. Robert Conway captures Lee's introversion; however, he makes the mistake of presenting himself in an unsmiling, rather dull manner — something Foster surely doesn't intend. Shara Campsall had the most success in creating a nuanced character. We believe in Mary's loneliness, her low-key spunkiness — and most importantly, her touching regard for Lee, a man she's only just met.

Don Keith, a newcomer to Victoria, has created a convincingly detailed set of a cabin with tacky wallpaper, a deer-head trophy and a gaggle of baseball hats, proudly displayed on the wall in the manner of objets d'art.

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