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New City Stage presents Durang's 'Miss Witherspoon'



By Howard Shapiro
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Sometimes you just have to laugh. I did, through much of Christopher Durang's *Miss Witherspoon*, even though I knew I was laughing at some of American life's worst problems.

But the Durang play, which received its world premiere at Princeton's McCarter Theatre in 2005, is like that: It sets you up with extreme caricatures caught in America's own extremes, which they mock even as they act them out. The brash piece hasn't been done professionally in Philadelphia until now, and is getting an exhilarating local premiere by New City Stage Company at Center City's Adrienne Theatre.

The prolific Durang (*Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You*, *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*) specializes in squeezing life's sourest lemons into outrageously funny smiley-faced pitchers of Kool-Aid. In *Miss Witherspoon*, a middle-aged woman sick of life commits suicide, ends up in Bardo - in the culture of Tibet the place you wait to be reincarnated - and is sent back downstairs to do it all over again, and do it right.

But *Miss Witherspoon*, played by Julie Czarnecki with a perfect constant sense of pessimism and self-deprecation, will have none of it. Once back, all she's interested in is dying again, as soon as possible, and returning to a holding pattern that eventually will end in heaven, or somewhere like it.

But no one up there is listening - especially not her Indian angel (the excellent Indika Senanayake), who dismisses *Miss Witherspoon's* petulance and stresses her opportunity for achievement.

The play is often as outrageous (things fall erratically from the sky, as if Chicken Little were sane) as it is outré (I dare you not to laugh at the child-abuse scenes, or the remarkable way Jesus is conjured and several religious traditions are discussed.) But here's the strange thing: It has a solid, conventional point about the ability of all of us to change.

Miss Witherspoon brings New City Stage - among Philadelphia's numerous small, spunky professional theater companies - to a new level, at the beginning of its fifth season. The fleet-footed production is directed by Ryder Thornton to enhance the already clever script with great effects - S. Cory Palmer's heavenly partitions that fan from the stage walls, Matt Lorenz's cool sound design, Robert Carlton's original music, Matt Sharp's lighting, and the amusing costumes by Amy Chmielewski. Add the superb acting, and the show generally raises the theater company's future bar.

Russ Widdall, Wendy Staton, and company founder and coartistic director Ginger Dayle adroitly play a number of roles, and no matter whether *Miss Witherspoon* raises us to its never-quite-heavenly height or sinks us to its lowest point of desperation, it's as poignant in the end as it is funny all along. Durang has God in some form (pick whichever deity you like) holding up a mirror to *Miss Witherspoon* throughout, asking her what potential she sees there - and asking us the same thing, as we consider just who is responsible for repairing the world.

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Indika Senanayake, Russ Widdall, Wendy Staton and Julie Czarnecki in *Miss Witherspoon*.