

Affirmation in the absurd

Christopher Durang offers something to be grateful for with his exploration of suicide and reincarnation in “Miss Witherspoon.”

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Christopher Durang’s “Miss Witherspoon” may seem an unlikely play to stage around the holidays, considering that, shortly into it, the title character commits suicide and is then confronted with the possibility of reincarnation.

But the production, which is making its Philadelphia premiere with the New City Stage Company, does offer an uplifting glimmer. And that it’s a Durang farce — as established early on when a middle-aged Veronica (Julie Czarnecki, in her New City Stage debut) makes a frantic entrance, terrified that the sky is falling — is almost an entertainment guarantee.

The sky never falls, but Skylab, the abandoned space station, does come crashing back to Earth. This prompts Veronica, already exasperated with life, to take her own, but rather than the stupor of oblivion she had hoped for, she finds herself in the bardo, an intermediate place, in Tibetan Buddhism, between death and reincarnation as a new soul.

Dubbed “Miss Witherspoon” by her guide to the afterlife — it has something to do with her “brown tweed aura” — Veronica stubbornly resists all attempts to cycle through several more lifetimes in order to learn the lessons that will help her achieve true wisdom.

Of course, supreme silliness ensues as the neurotic protagonist does indeed get a second, third and fourth chance at life.



Starring in “Miss Witherspoon” are (from left) Indika Senanyake, Russ Widdall, Wendy Staton and Julie Czarnecki.

But for all the satirical absurdity and the initially bleak premise of suicide — and Veronica’s isn’t the only one that takes place — the story is supported by a positive underpinning.

“Even though this show is about reincarnation and the lead character kills herself several times, the play itself is very life-affirming,” says Ginger Dayle, the Holland native and Council Rock High School graduate who founded New City Stage four years ago. “You don’t feel bad about yourself or how

tough life is when you’re watching it. You’re grateful for the experience of life, good and bad. That’s one thing about Mr. Durang’s work that I love — even the most depressing of issues can be joyfully laughed at in his work.”

The Erwinna playwright and Montclair, N.J., native has made a career of finding humor in despondent themes such as depression, alcoholism, mental illness and abuse.

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But while previous works like “Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You,” “The Marriage of Bette and Boo,” “Baby with the Bathwater” and “Beyond Therapy” seem to have hinged primarily on the hilarity of its characters’ suffering, “Miss Witherspoon” represents an almost softer side of Durang.

“Usually, he has very violent black comedies in which very absurd and dark things happen. This is one that’s kind of absurd and dark things do happen, but it actually ends up in a kind of positive place by the end. There’s some life renewal in it, which is interesting with Durang,” says director Ryder Thornton, a longtime enthusiast of the scribe’s works.

“The play is about someone who’s negating life. ... She is very much about being insular, noncommittal and uninterested in spiritual ideas or anything that doesn’t have to do with her immediate comfort or piece of mind,” he says. “That attitude is not unfamiliar to a lot of Americans, that cynical or skeptical persona who is more inclined to make negative choices. ... But through this kind of perpetual cycle of reincarnation, the character is pushed to a place where she has to affirm life and stop being such a sourpuss or negative Nelly.”

For a writer who’s often railed against Catholicism — the faith in which he was raised — as well as all forms of organized religion, the curious, kinder way in which he deals with spirituality here suggests he may have at last found his own peace with a higher, benevolent force — or at the very least is more comfortable inhabiting the questions along the path instead of making his usual condemnations.

Czarnecki, a graduate of Nazareth Academy High School in Northeast Philadelphia and a practicing Catholic, believes that audiences will not be able to leave “Miss Witherspoon” without engaging in some kind of discussion about their thoughts on life, death and the afterlife.

“I was taught by a bunch of nuns in high school and I’m

inviting all of them to see this,” she says, noting that the way her character questions her Christian religion in the play reminds her of her own sincere inquiries during her grade-school religion classes.



Julie Czarnecki is making her New City Stage debut.

The way these ideas are explored is very fresh and irreverent. With other plays and other genres in which I’ve seen this, they’ve been very precious with discussing spirituality or very heavy-handed,” says Czarnecki. “Christopher has a brilliant way of seriously tackling these ideas in a deep yet lighthearted way.”

Thornton refers to Durang as an “intellectual farce writer.” Rather than relying on slamming doors, mistaken identities, and the more physical rigors and superficial portrayals of traditional farce, he places his characters in preposterous circumstances with the exaggeration of their pain and personality traits used to set up complex ideas and paradigms.

“What I also like about (Durang) is that he knows how to look at things without a filter,” says Thornton. “He has no illusions about the conditions or pain that human beings have to go through but finds humor in it by pushing it to extremes. A lot of people shy away from his work because it is disturbing, but I find there’s something very brave about that. He looks at things realistically, and it’s actually very humanizing.”

And Durang, 61, is no stranger to pain himself. He was born to an alcoholic father and a mother who had three still-born babies following his birth. His parents would eventually divorce — at only 19, he testified against his father in court — and his mother would then succumb to a protracted battle with breast and bone cancer.

“He did kind of have a very

unsettling and violent upbringing himself,” says Thornton. “He was a survivor of severe family dysfunction. That made him depressed himself. ... Comedy for him was a way of medicating or dealing with the legacy of a troubled upbringing.”

Durang has said in previous interviews that his life took a turn for the better when he met his partner, John Augustine, and began attending Al-Anon meetings, for friends and relatives of alcoholics. Thornton believes that shift is reflected in “Miss Witherspoon,” which premiered at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton in 2005, before moving on to Playwrights Horizon in New York, and made the top 10 best plays lists of both *Time* magazine and *Newsday* that year. It was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in drama.

“The play certainly reads like it’s about somebody who’s gone through depression and come out on the other side. It’s almost like he’s written a play about someone who’s suicidal who actually becomes a bit of a hero and somewhat of a champion of life,” says Thornton.

Dayle, who is also producing artistic director at New City Stage and stars as Veronica’s mother — twice — in the play, believes the extremes to which Durang pushes his characters are often freeing.

“There is definitely a shade of Veronica in all of us, but most of us are good at keeping our neuroses to ourselves,” she says. “Veronica is just like us, the audience — an everyday woman who is smart and savvy and fed up with it all. ... And she gets to act out her obsessions out loud and deal with the havoc they create. Everyone has the desire to scream about a broken heart or the unfairness of the world but very few of us have the forum to do that in.

“Even though she can be extreme in her actions and very outspoken about why the world is such a mess, you’re with her every step of the way and rooting for her from your seat.”

“Miss Witherspoon” runs through Jan. 9 at The Adrienne, 2030 Sansom St., Philadelphia. Tickets: Thursday evenings and Sunday matinees, \$20; Friday and Saturday evenings, \$24; students and seniors, \$18. Information and show times: 215-563-7500; www.newcitystage.org.