

Intense thriller forces you to react

Sun Jan 13 2008

By Bryan Rivers

Une dangereuse obsession, the latest offering of the Cercle Molière season, which opened Friday night, is a heart-stopping, spine-chilling thriller.

The gripping production, by Des Productions Jean-Bernard Hébert, of Montreal, takes the audience on a wild roller-coaster ride of emotions, building inexorably to a cliffhanging climax with several plot twists in the closing minutes.

The text is a translation of British playwright Nigel J. Crisp's hit play, *Dangerous Obsession*. It is in the classic tradition of the British detective story, complete with isolated country house, the archetypal arrival of an uninvited visitor, telephones that do not work, and the gradual revelation of facts from the past that threaten to destroy the superficiality of the perfect, privileged life.

What elevates Crisp's play above the normal clichéd formula for this type of drama is his injection of some philosophical, psychological and relational questions about the nature of human behaviour.

Thus, the play not only forces us to react to the action on stage, but also to reflect on our choice of a moral framework with which to evaluate the behaviour we are witnessing.

The entire action takes place in the conservatory of Sally and Mark Driscoll's country home, where the quiet, comfortably sheltered lives of this prosperous couple are suddenly disrupted by the unexpected and ultimately extremely menacing arrival of a chance acquaintance, John Barnett. The strength of this production lies in the extremely realistic delineation of all three characters and the curious dynamic with the audience whereby each person evokes both sympathy and a measure of contempt.

Jean-François Blanchard, as John, is the catalyst for action and drama. His clipped, disciplined and restrained use of gesture and intonation present John as a repressed, disturbed, manipulative, controlling, yet uncertain man. There is a coldness and menacing edge to the characterization, but, at times, one feels compassion towards him.

Luc Chapdelaine, as Mark, is a very effective foil. Mark is played as a sophisticated, bored, egocentric, self-made man, with little time for compassion or interest in John's problems. The collapse of Mark's poised facade under the ultimately terrorizing impact of John's revelations is a major aspect of the production's dramatic impact.

Myriam Poirier, as Sally, has the challenge of delineating the most complex emotional transitions. Awkward hostess, violated homeowner, disenchanted wife, potential victim, she too begins to disintegrate under the effects of drink, stress, and the impact of John's cumulative revelations of dark secrets from the past. The growing ambivalence of her feelings towards both men, and her developing sense of outrage and injustice, sympathy and fury, make her role a dramatic bridge between the interactions of the two men.

Une dangereuse obsession is a powerful, draining and disturbing play, and this particular production, which is entirely convincing, masterfully exploits its potential. It holds our attention from the outset, challenges our sensibilities, sympathies and values, and sends us away drained, yet wanting more.