

'The Best Brothers' finds the fun in funeral

By KATHLEEN PALMER

Staff Writer

We all know, from personal experience or from movies and the news, that death can often bring out the worst in survivors. But sometimes, as we struggle to accept the loss of a loved one, we are able to find a way to let go of other things and embrace what's left and what's important.

Merrimack Repertory Theatre presents the dramatic comedy "The Best Brothers," by popular Canadian playwright Daniel MacIvor, through Feb. 1 at their theater home in Lowell. Directed by MRT's outgoing artistic director Charles Towers, the two-man show stars Michael Canavan and Bill Kux as brothers dealing with the sudden – and bizarrely humorous – death of their mother, Bunny Best. Canavan is Hamilton Best, the taciturn architect and older brother; Kux is Kyle Best, a realtor. The two professions are played off each other as much as any of the disparities between them. Kyle is used to kowtowing to his brother's lead. When Hamilton says "it's your decision" on the simple question of visiting hours for Bunny, Kyle is taken aback and stumped at the opportunity to call the shots.

I don't want to give too much away as to the story line – that includes telling you how Bunny dies. The enjoyment of the burst of laughter as the characters discuss it is part of the experience. But I will say the cause of her demise becomes a sore point between the brothers and opens old wounds that are, in truth, mostly just personal perceptions and

IF YOU GO

MRT presents 'The Best Brothers'

WHEN: Through Feb. 1. See website for dates and times.

WHERE: Nancy L. Donohue Theatre, 50 E. Merrimack St., Lowell, Mass.

COST: \$20-\$60. Group rates and other discounts available.

INFORMATION: 1-978-654-4678, box_office@mrt.org or mrt.org.

not necessarily fact. Kyle doesn't understand his brother's anger; confused by it, he insists "Mom loved you more," to which Hamilton tersely replies "But she loved you ... harder."

The men's romantic relationships are seen peripherally, as Hamilton's cold marriage is held up against Kyle's pairing with a sex worker. The play cycles through the tasks of survivors: Writing the obituary, arranging the wake, reading the eulogy, answering the condolence cards, and dealing with the will and what remains to be divided up. Each step has its frustrations for Hamilton, and its comedic payoff for the audience. Kyle is fussy and a bit too "events planner" for Hamilton, fretting over every word in the obit and wanting to serve "fancy sandwiches" and cake at the wake. He wants to answer each condolence card based on the sender's relationship with their mother, and his ever-increasing sorting piles become too much for exasperated Hamilton. He jumps in while Hamilton is delivering a solemn, pre-



Photo courtesy of MEGHAN MOORE

From left, Michael Canavan as Hamilton and Bill Kux as Kyle in Merrimack Repertory Theatre's production of "The Best Brothers."

pared eulogy, with cheery asides and anecdotes.

The brothers also wonder what to do with their mother's dog, an Italian greyhound she obtained later in life. There is a terrifically written bit at the end, comparing dogs to the hearts of their humans. "Some are messy; some don't do what you tell them," one brother notes. "You can tell a lot about a person's heart by their dog," says another.

MacIvor also writes a brilliant rant for Hamilton (you'll have to wait to see who he's ranting at), who is disgusted by modern-day Legos. Paraphrasing: "You can't just buy Legos anymore," the architect fumes. He aptly observes "We used to create things. Now every set comes with instructions on what to

build. They've removed our imaginations from it." His anger culminates with "How do you build something that's already built?!" In the end, the brothers must come accept their place in their mother's life, their roles in the family, and each other. We are pleased when Hamilton looks at his younger brother, touches his face, and says "You're exactly who you should be."

The physical gesture is a leitmotif originally shown by their mother touching each son's face in turn. Bunny is portrayed by Canavan and Kux throughout the play through asides – designated by the actors taking her red hat and white gloves from a hatbox and donning them for monologues detailing Bunny's life. At first this

feels odd – my companion did not like it – but the actors are able to suspend our disbelief as they disappear into the female character.

Bunny is revealed as a person who was "always a planet, but never the sun." Her dog finally gives her the sought-after feeling of being "the center of (someone's) universe."

I saw the press preview, so I'm hoping that maybe the cue pickups will be a little faster during the run. The hemming-and-hawing pauses in, say, the obituary writing scene are for laughs, and draw us into the exasperation of Hamilton with his brother. But they still felt a bit too dragged out. I'm also spoiled by the beautiful, complex set designs of MRT's Bill Clarke – as seen in shows like "Equally

Divided" and "Stella and Lou" – and this bare-bones stage gives the audience no eye candy to relieve a two-man dialogue show. I assume the stripped-down set design was dictated by the script, but I look forward to Clarke being able to enthrall with his creativity again in the future.

The tight, 90-minute show has no intermission (I enjoy not being taken out of the story midway, personally), and is a lovely character study. There are layers that are revealed upon later reflection that make this a fine, well-written show. Canavan and Kux are believable as brothers, as they struggle to figure out who's the best.

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**THEATER
REVIEW**