

Theatre review: The Ladies Foursome rarely lands the green

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The cast of the Theatre Arts Guild production of *The Ladies Foursome*.

With over fifty scripts under his belt, Norm Foster is one of Canada's most produced playwrights. His writing rarely makes you think. Like watching a well-crafted but inane sitcom, they may be pleasant enough but are just as forgettable five minutes after they are over.

The Ladies Foursome tells the story of four women who have just lost their best friend, Catherine. Margot, Tate and Connie played golf weekly for over ten years with their recently deceased friend, while Dory has known Catherine from a summer lodge. Throughout the show, the women spill all sorts of secrets about their dead friend.

Spoiler alert, some secrets are revealed in this review. The warning is however technically unnecessary as they rarely surprise, with an opening night audience audibly guessing, often correctly, what was to come next.

More stereotypes than characters, the foursome are two-dimensional. There is the dumb one, the sassy one, and the one who sleeps around. There is a lot of profanity and sex, which is meant to feel naughty but is designed purely as a way to elicit gasps or laughs.

It would take a strong production team and actors to elevate Foster's material, and this community theatre/amateur production rarely rises to the challenge. With nineteen scenes, each taking place at the start of a different hole, the imperative here is for variation.

Under the direction of Elaine Casey, every scene ends identically. Each concludes with a tag line, a snarky comment delivered to the audience, and the foursome schlepping off with their bags stage left, only to re-enter with their bags stage right. Nineteen times with zero variation.

And while the pacing at the top is fast and furious, by the middle of act one things begin to lag. The fault of Foster's writing in many ways, but some variance is an absolute must. Golf on television is boring to watch; golf in the theatre shouldn't be.

Nick Jupp's static set design doesn't help. While painted nicely by Cheryl Theriault and Brenda Tydmers and well lit by Bill Barnaby there seems to be little effort to distinguish each hole. Philip Joy's sound design is also apparent, with ambient golf sounds between scenes. It contributed to the sluggishness of a show that should wrap in two hours but stretched to over two and a half on opening night.

There are a few bright lights in the show. Heidi Patullo as Tate delivers one of the clearest performances of the night. Quirky and wide-eyed, she rarely missed a laugh and is the most believable as a bored housewife aching to find an identity of her own.

As Margot, Cathy Cameron also delivers zingers throughout the show as she nurses beer after beer. While her drinking is used as misplaced comedy, Cameron manages an honest portrayal of a woman sad over the loss of a relationship with her daughter and yet excited for a newfound love. You genuinely ache for Margot when you find out about her past.

Successful in fits and starts, Eileen Carey as the sexually liberal Connie may have the swagger of a "cougar," but it was tough to buy her as the man-eater she claims. Saddled with a dreadful monologue about how her husband passed away, it is directed straight out to the audience as if begging us to feel. Unfortunately, we were not buying what Foster was trying to sell.

Completing the foursome is Shannon Kelly as Dory. All eyes and mouth, Kelly seemed to be directed in a completely different play, acting her heart out to a house of 2,000 as opposed to the intimate Pond Playhouse. Here again, the playwright lets his actors down. Dory may be on the verge of a nervous breakdown, but he saddles her with a moronic backstory and a less than exciting life. You scratch your head as to why this character exists except as a way to convey secrets that the departed Catherine felt about her three friends.

The secrets and admissions come fast and furious in act two, but none are particularly surprising or worth caring about. Alcoholism, death of a family member, gambling problems, and (gasp!) someone is gay, all tumble out willy nilly as in the worst kind of after

school special. It seems to be an issue party, and everyone wants to get in on the action. Unfortunately, director Casey does her cast a disservice in most of these moments by having her actors play them for melodramatic effect, with lights down, and direct to audience sadness. It may be meant to be humble, but it comes across as cheesy.

At the end of the show, there is a beautiful moment where Shannon Kelly sings. With a lovely singing voice and assisted by the other three women, it is a goose-bump moment with honesty and reality. Unfortunately, it just takes too long to get there.

***The Ladies Foursome* by Norm Foster. Directed by Elaine Casey. A Theatre Arts Guild production on stage at the Pond Playhouse (6 Parkhill Road, Halifax) until October 5. Visit tagtheatre.com for tickets and information.**

Editor's Note (7 October 2019): This review was edited to identify the production as a community theatre (amateur) production. This decision was made after a careful review of past coverage of community/amateur/pre-professional productions where this has often been called out. We would like to thank those who joined us in the conversation about identifying shows as such.