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A Strong End To Stray Kat Theatre's First Act

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Stray Kat Theatre's First Act

By Shannon Hicks

At the conclusion of the reading of *Our Lady of Allapattah*, presented on May 6 by Stray Kats Theatre Company, something happened for the first time this season: The actors and their artistic director were given a standing ovation.

The company offered its season finale to a small but very appreciative audience on Friday night. It was a shame that more did not attend the event, presented in The Alexandria Room at Edmond Town Hall. The good news is, Stray Kats Artistic Director Kate Katcher announced during her welcome remarks (and reiterated during intermission) that plans are well underway for the company's second season. Hopefully more people will discover the company and its offerings, which only add to the diverse arts and entertainment options already available in Newtown.

Meanwhile, Ms Katcher selected a play by Christopher Demos Brown to close the professional company's 2010-11 season. On its surface, *Our Lady of Allapattah* concerns the appearance of a 15-foot-tall image of the Virgin Mary that appears on the concrete wall of a strip mall in the Allapattah neighborhood of Miami. Two Miami cops — one a devout Pentecostal (John, read by Brian Carter) and the other an atheist (Keith, read by Don Striano, who originated the role) — follow the occurrence and its effects on the community while debating their religious views and what the icon means, whether it's real or a hoax.

There is no pretense: Publicity for each Stray Kats show clearly mentions these are going to be staged readings. The actors unabashedly work on stage with script in hand.

Nevertheless, rehearsals have obviously been held prior to the readings and the professional actors are all Equity members for a reason. The scripts almost act like props themselves; they hardly seem to be needed.

(Ms Katcher was also very careful to point out, both in preshow publicity as well as during her welcome remarks Friday night, that *Our Lady of Allapattah* contains “some strong language — strong, but necessary in order for the characters to be true to life,” she said.)

Equity members Brian Carter, Patrick Kearney, and Don Striano, as well as Actors Equity Member Candidate Kim Maresco (who should receive full membership easily, judging from Friday’s performance) were all well suited for the roles into which they had been placed.

Mr Carter and Mr Striano seemed to be working effortlessly as the pair of police officers who battle both each other as well as the growing number of personal demons being gathered by Keith. John keeps trying to both keep track of and cover for his partner, who in turn seems to continue making bad choices with severe consequences.

Mr Kearney played Eddie, who is running a pawn shop in a strip mall he has inherited following the death of his parents when the story opens. A man who began life full of financial and intellectual promise, Eddie is a chameleon through the run of the play. It is not always clear for the audience to see who or what he is, and Mr Kearney did a very good job of transforming Eddie from a former classmate of John into what may or may not be a living idol.

Ms Maresca is equally strong as the one female in the play, an injured crack addict named Laura who is transformed by Eddie and what he believes the icon represents.

A postreading discussion added approximately 15 minutes to the evening. The time allowed the audience to interact directly with the cast and Ms Katcher, learn about some of the interaction that had gone between some of them during rehearsals (the inquisition of Ms Maresca’s character by the police officers, for instance, was one such topic), and also gave the audience the rare opportunity to communicate indirectly with the playwright.

Ms Katcher told the audience that Mr Demos Brown had planned to attend the evening’s reading, but he was unable to make the trip from Florida due to work obligations (in addition to his role as playwright, Mr Demos Brown is a Miami-based attorney). In his absence, she promised to forward comments, questions, and criticisms to Mr Demos Brown on their behalf.

While Ms Katcher is talking about fully staged productions in the future, the inaugural season has been wonderful. With minimal sets and huge talent, live theater is just as fun and entertaining when a good rehearsal leads to a great reading.

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