

Watching 'Grass' grow is a lot of fun

By Fernando Valdivia

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Woodstock — Carol Hall's two-act play "The Days Are as Grass" is receiving its world premiere at the Woodstock Fringe Festival of Theatre & Song at the Byrdcliffe Theatre. Eight wryly humorous and poignant vignettes feature two versatile actors portraying 14 characters at a point in their lives when introspection and accommodation have gradually replaced initiative and self-interest.

Cleverly utilizing a pair of upholstered daybeds, a few props and an eclectic wardrobe, scenic design consultant Michael Miller and costume designer Tracy Christiansen provide the actors with the basic essentials for their respective characterizations. As directed by Vivian Matalon, a Tony-winner for the 1980 revival of "Morning's at Seven," Brent Erdy and Nicola Sheara offer insightful portraits of couples and individuals ranging from rural folk to cosmopolitan sophisticates.

Preceded by selections from Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons," each scene is introduced by displaying its title on an easel. Beginning with "Life Time," Erdy and Sheara appear as an elderly farming couple whose marriage has survived his unpleasant mother as well as the problems and crises common among families. Their gentle banter, spoken in a colloquial diction, is more affectionate than critical.

Exchanging her baggy sweater for a tailored blazer, Sheara returns in "Last Will and Testament" as an affluent doyenne informing her psychiatrist with some ambivalence how she plans to distribute her valuable possessions among her relatives and friends. And in "The River Jordan Lamp," Sheara transforms herself yet again into a lonely woman living in a trailer. This character befriends a Mexican migrant worker's son who is fascinated by her cherished lamp.

For his part, Erdy is equally skillful in assuming the persona of each of his characters. Whether expressing vicarious excitement at observing a pair of adulterous fellow travelers on a flight to the Bahamas or playing a jilted gay actor tentatively resuming an abandoned friendship with a book-loving friend, Erdy adapts his gestures and vocal and facial expressions to suit each role.

The play's title, taken from Psalm 103 — "As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower in the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more" — establishes the play's underlying theme of life's precious impermanence and our senescent reconciliations.

Although the hint of mortality lingers at the fringe of every scene, even "The Fisher Funeral," "Sensations" and "The Last Word" are neither morbid nor given to despondence. The dialogue is actually quite witty — as to be expected from Hall, the songwriter behind "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas."