

September 2, 2004

Theater/Rebecca Daniels

Love and death on the fringe

A delightful blend of humor and poignancy pervades Carol Hall's new play: *The Days are as Grass*. Vivian Matalon has done a skillful job directing this entertaining yet deeply meaningful piece in which seasoned professionals Nicola Sheara and Brent Erdy portray fourteen different characters. *The Days are as Grass* is being given its world premiere by the Woodstock Fringe Festival at the Byrdcliffe Theatre through September 5.

Playwright Hall is an award-winning lyricist and composer, best known for writing the score for *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. *The Days are as Grass* is a departure for her, but you wouldn't know it. The two-act play, divided into eight short scenes, is a beautifully and intelligently written exploration of the universal themes of love and death.

Nicola Sheara's performance in this challenging theatre piece is not to be missed. With minimal changes in costume, makeup and hair, the Broadway actress transforms herself in each scene, two of which are lengthy monologues. It's an extraordinary feat for any actor, and we are extremely fortunate to have Sheara living in our midst. She has made an incredible contribution to local theatre in the last several years as an actress, director and production of the professional reading series, TheaterSounds. Brent Erdy's performance doesn't have the range that Sheara's has, and he was less convincing when playing older characters. Nonetheless, her performed with energy and conviction and the two worked well together.

Aging and death are the primary themes of the first half of *The Days are as Grass*. In the opening scene, *Life Time*, two elderly farm people look back at their lives together with bittersweet mix of regret and abiding affection. The woman in *Last Will and Testament*, is younger, fashionably dressed and coiffed. Babbling on in a cheerful voice, she delivers a monologue about how she wanted her friends to have "small mementos" after the funeral that she was planning for herself, but when she considered how this would actually play out, she gave up on the idea.

A middle-aged couple at *The Fisher Funeral* gossip gleefully about the Fishers, two psychiatrists,

who were friends of theirs. They reminisce about the Fisher wedding and an embarrassing episode at the wedding when things spun out of control. The actors reappear in *Sensations* as an older couple, sitting in their twin rockers in robes and slippers, waiting for the pills they've been secretly saving up to take effect and end their lives.

Act two focuses on love, with an echoing refrain about death in the final scene. In *Vacation*, a married couple in the Nassau airport gossips about a woman they saw on the plane who is having an affair. *The River Jordan Lamp*, another monologue delivered by Sheara, tells the story of a lonely trailer park woman who makes the mistake of getting involved with a young boy.

A 20-year reunion between two old friends sets up the title scene, *The Days are as Grass*. Their affair of the mind lives on, even though she's much older than he and he's gay. Of all the scenes, this was the only one that seemed to go on a little too long.

Appropriately, *The Last Word*, ends the evening on a note of poignancy and hope. She's in a wheelchair, unresponsive. He tries unsuccessfully to get her to respond. The lighting changes, she leaves her chair and speaks (unheard by her partner), letting us know that she is not afraid.

The technical aspects of this production were handled well. Charles Traeger acted as Production Stage Manager. Michael Miller designed a simple, yet flexible set. Tracy Christensen's costumes communicated the essence of the characters and Zack Jacob's lighting design was effective.

The Days are as Grass will play for four more performances, Thursday, September 2, through Sunday, September 5, at 8 pm at the Byrdcliffe Theater in Woodstock. The final weekend of the festival will also see the premiere of *Greetings From Yorkville*, a cabaret musical. Plus there will be two American SongFest concerts at St. Gregory's Episcopal Church. Individual tickets are \$20; students and seniors are \$17. To order tickets call 679-0167 or go online at www.woodstockfringe.org.