

StarTribune.com | MINNEAPOLIS - ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

Theater review: 'Trying' finds a place for flawed humans

THEATER REVIEW: Emotional simplicity reveals the deeper heart of a working relationship between a young secretary and an eccentric old man.

By [Graydon Royce](#), Star Tribune

Last update: September 22, 2007 – 10:50 PM

Winsome naif meets irascible old coot, sands off his crusty edges and a fond relationship grows. How often have we seen this story?

Which only makes it more remarkable that playwright Joanna McClelland Glass finds new warmth and sharp drama within these lines. Her memoir "Trying," which opened Friday at Park Square Theatre in St. Paul, lays bare the vulnerabilities of two wounded people without a lot of sticky sentiment.

Mitch Albom, are you listening?

In 1967, Glass was personal secretary to Francis Biddle, whose distinguished career included stints as Franklin Roosevelt's last attorney general and chief judge at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials. Boasting a British lineage to colonial days, Biddle reeked of the Ivy League elitism that dominated American governance and cultural life before 1980. Glass (the play's Sarah Schorr) skated in from the Canadian prairie, a country bumpkin steeped in populist values of hard work and modesty.

Glass (Sarah) took the job after a long line of secretaries had decided life was too short to tolerate a cranky and arrogant old man who was wracked by arthritis and creeping mental deterioration. Glass the playwright sketches in just enough of Sarah's unhappiness to give us a clue of why she might have stuck with this odd companionship.

Director Warren Bowles has trod this ground before -- most notably at Park Square's "Visiting Mr. Green" in 2002. He trusts the script, and he draws from his two fine actors performances that transparently illustrate both the personal tale and the societal shift away from the Eastern establishment that began in the late 1960s.

Emily Gunyou Halaas plays Sarah with a flat affect -- resisting that excruciating tendency of some actors to give their feminist characters a chirpy feistiness. The deeper dignity she finds accents the poignancy when Richard Ooms' Biddle bites into her. I have secretly cheered in similar situations as the spunky twit is dressed down, but here my heart broke for this decent woman.

Ooms is a master of elocution and eccentricity with his Biddle. Occasionally his work can get fussy -- aware of the audience -- but he commands our attention with the awkward physicality of old age, his robust voice and an unerring sense of patrician toughness.

So tight is the intellectual dance between Ooms and Halaas that small emotional moments surprise us with their exquisite power. Michael Hoover's set -- a big, peaked

garage roof cut away jaggedly to reveal a rustic old office -- feels so essential as to be a third character.

This is just a lovely staging, confident in what it has to say: We are all flawed humans, and we need each other.

Graydon Royce • 612-673-7299

Graydon Royce • groyce@startribune.com

© 2007 Star Tribune. All rights reserved.