

Synergic Theater's 'Birthday' cause for celebration

Synergic Theater's recent premiere of "Birthdays" at Duke is cause for celebration for dance lovers and theatergoers alike.

Dancer and choreographer Suzanne White Manning has the ability to create magic onstage, to envelope layers of meaning in wondrous sets, sound and movements. She and husband David employ spoken word, singing, taped voices and music, words and images projected slide-show style as well as characterizations and movements to create a complex piece that involves the viewer in an exciting and enjoyable way.

A Review

Recounting what happens in this piece is like trying to explain a story by Tolstoy, so rich are the connotations and characterizations in "Birthday." And this, along with the imaginative visual concepts, make this work fascinating to watch and interesting to contemplate after the performance is over. As in any well-realized artistic creation, this work invites, and demands more than one viewing.

"Birthdays" is full of what it means to be human, to live life measured by one birthday after another. And birthdays, like life, seldom measure up to expectations. It's the trying that counts.

"Birthdays" is more outwardly oriented than "Private Lives" also performed in this program. "Private Lives" uses few sets and minimal movements to suggest emotions just below the surface. "Birthdays" employs large props. The set is used to convey layers of meaning and great expanses of time in this piece. Large props include reflective screens and a scrim, a

semitransparent curtain. A rubber duck, a mammoth birthday cake on wheels that doubles as storage for costume changes — and a big flounder, (real but no longer alive) are some other props used in this theater piece.

This piece has that special quality of birthday magic — the glow of candles, the anticipated packages with unknown surprises waiting to be uncovered. But there is a dark side too — that yearning for a perfect day, then the disappointment when the impossible doesn't happen.

Bryce Wagner as Billy Ryan communicates the gangly innocence of an adolescent whose retardation keeps him forever childlike.

Suzanne White Manning portrays the fierce determination of a mother to protect her retarded son; he is allowed to celebrate no birthdays probably because she wants to protect him from the fact that each year does not bring mental maturity for him. She seeks to shield

him from scrutiny, symbolized by the shade she intermittently pulls down in front of the fishing pier where Billy proudly catches his flounder.

Anne Deloria's Astra provides mystery and amusement as her character is always changing from an old woman to a baby and from infancy to old age; Astra, we are told, has had three lives. Deloria's movements portray a baby playing with a rubber duck in her bath, awkward adolescence and the halting steps of old age.

Cousin Schenectedy (Marjorie Scheer) and Fred Troy (Jack Arnold) represent that element of human nature always expecting perfection and experiencing disappointment — but trying nonetheless to make life fit their image of how things should be.

Like a birthday party, long anticipated, but quickly over, this 50-minute piece seems over much too quickly. Perhaps Synergic Theater will invite us back to another presentation of "Birthday" soon.

— SUSAN BROILI