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REVIEW: The American Plan

Summer Circle

"The American Plan" closes Summer Circle on a high note

by Bridgette Redman

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The relationship between mother and daughter can be a treacherous one.

Indeed, any relationship soaked with love can be a treacherous one, as Richard Greenberg so compellingly shows us in "The American Plan." Michigan State University's Summer Circle closes out its summer season with this 1990 drama, set in 1960.

Lili (Grace Hinkley) has had her eye on Nick (Kirill Sheynerman), though she doesn't quite believe she can win him. She lives in relative isolation at the Catskills while he stays at the nearby hotel on the other side of the lake, living on "the American Plan." Both vacation there and both are open to romance.

They have to overcome Eva (Chris Purchis), Lili's mother, a German Jew who escaped on the last boat out of Germany in 1940. She is a force to be reckoned with and not about to let her daughter be carried off by an imagined knight in shining armor.

Hinkley and Purchis dominate this production, though theirs certainly isn't the only story being told in "The American Plan." Hinkley drips quirky charisma with a wildly

energetic role. She mixes vulnerability with aggressive patter, making Lili unpredictable, sensitive and sympathetic—even when she is at her most obnoxious.

Purchis storms the stage and is the mirror image of Hinkley. Her Eva is strong, manipulative, sure of herself and always in control. She nails the German accent, immediately identifying her as an "other" among the Catskills inhabitants. She is the only one in this cast who isn't also in the Summer Circle's late night show, "An Adult Evening with Shel Silverstein." But Purchis fits right into the chemistry of this ensemble.

When clashing, the two show unhappy strengths as they fight a battle from which neither will emerge with happiness or victory.

Mark Colson directs this cast of five and layers the show so it is constantly building on the secrets it reveals and the stakes it raises. He is especially effective in revealing characters by the way they move across the stage. Lili makes broad crosses, bursting with a desire to escape. Eva is controlled and purposeful. Olivia (Imani Bonner) keeps a constant eye on her employers and companions. Nick and Gil (Joshua Gronlund) move like prep schoolboys who are moving from the 50s to the 60s in more ways than just chronologically.

Sheynerman and Hinkley make a bid for happiness and it is easy to believe in their relationship. Sheynerman is gentle and devoted and we want to believe him when he tells Eva that he creates happiness for others.

Bonner's Olivia finds a way to have an honest relationship with both Eva and Lili, perhaps because she keeps her secrets and hides herself away from the other two volatile women.

Gronlund shows up in the latter half of the play. His Gil has moments where he could be compared to Eva in ruthlessness, but he is ultimately too vulnerable.

All the characters except for Olivia are chasing happiness by the relationships they form, flee from or try to break apart. Every contact with another human being is fraught with control, fear, hope and insecurity. Greenburg teases us with hope for each of the characters.

Blue is the main theme in Chris Stowell's scene design, evoking both sky and the waters of the lake, the waters that play a symbolic role throughout the course of the two-act play. Derc McNish is the dialect coach and works well with each of the actors to make sure the accent never gets in the way of them being understood.

"The American Plan" is a literary drama that this ensemble digs deeply into. They explore the fragility of relationships and the power that they hold over us. They give themselves fully to such emotions as fear, love, desire and insecurity. They give us the dream that escape might be possible. "The American Plan" is a solid evening of theater in the highest traditions of American drama.

Run Time: 8 p.m. to 10 p.m., with one intermission.