



Aug 17

The Lyons at SART

“Some people are happy. And some people are just lonely, mean and sad.” So says a character toward the end of the Nicky Silver play *The Lyons*. As anyone who has seen one of Silver’s intensely dark comedies can attest, the playwright is laser-focused on the latter group.

In *The Lyons*, which wraps its too-brief run Sunday, August 18, at the Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre in Mars Hill, the nuclear family of the title gathers in the hospital room of Ben (Michael Mattison), the elderly father, who has terminal cancer. His wife, Rita (Callan White), seems largely unmoved by his prognosis and starts the play off with a monologue about how she’ll redecorate the living room after he’s gone:

“I look at the sofa. I know it was cream when we bought it. Now it’s just some washed-out shade of dashed hopes. The chairs are the color of disgust.” When Ben replies with angry expletives, she comments indignantly, “This cancer eating away at you has put you in a terrible mood.”

The Lyons is advertised by SART as “A dark comedy. Very dark,” and it hits that target early on and pounds away at it with Silver’s sharps zingers. The SART production hits exactly the right balance of pathos and nastiness, recognizing that Silver’s humor derives chiefly from characters who say exactly what’s on their minds, baring one another’s secrets and their own without mercy.

It’s not as easy as it sounds. The characters have to elicit a modicum of sympathy as they pummel one another, and many a playwright has fallen on his own sharp knife trying to turn bitter recriminations into comedy. But Silver is a master, the SART cast is up to the challenge, and *The Lyons* is entertaining from start to finish.

The showiest role is Rita, originated in New York in 2011 by Linda Lavin, and Callan White makes the part her own, launching the show with her perky delivery of Rita’s callous pronouncements (she thinks one of her grandchildren is “retarded,” for example) and closing it with a poignant monologue that she makes both heartless and heartfelt. Michael Mattison is her equal, and makes the unhappy, bigoted Ben recognizable and even slightly sad.



The cast of *The Lyons* includes, from left, Chelsey Mirheli, Michael Mattison, and Callan White.

The adult children are more unhinged. As recovering alcoholic and single mother Lisa, Chelsey Mirheli has the widest range of moods to play, from vulnerable to devastated to seemingly happy, and she hits every mark. Maximilian Koger is very funny as the gay son, a struggling, self-deprecating writer who has shed his birth name for the more sophisticated Curtis. Playing one of Silver’s signature hysterics, Koger’s best scene is an explosive confrontation in an empty condo, meeting with a Manhattan real estate agent name Brian for reasons that become apparent only gradually. Koger captures Curtis’s painful self-loathing and gets plenty of laughs but might have been even more impressive had he trusted the material more and toned down some of his exaggerated facial expressions and gestures.

That’s really the only criticism as well for director Tyler Adcock’s work. Silver’s comedy has to be played just a few degrees removed from naturalism, or it become shrill, and Adcock keeps the show grounded in the characters’ lives without overplaying the biting humor. Even the two supporting players — Brandon Harmon as Brian, the Realtor, and Shannon Harmon as a benevolent nurse whose kind demeanor slips in Act Two — are given their moments to shine as fully realized people.

The uncredited set design, like the characters, is cleanly imagined — realistic without being overly specific — and the costumes by Tia Turner express well the characters’ various traits and situations. Lighting by Andrew Zebroski and assistant Braeden Johnson, at first uniformly bright, develops subtleties along with the show. Cassidy Robbins keeps things clear on the sound board, and Brianna Brunner has rustled up a lot of authentic props. The stage managing team is led by Pem Tomaselli, with assistance from Tuner and Brunner.

There are just two performances left, but if you love Nicky Silver or dark comedies or just some potent stage venom, get to Mars Hill for SART’s summer season closer tonight (August 17) or for the matinee August 18. The next SART show will be *Miracle in Bedford Falls*, a musical based on *It’s a Wonderful Life*, opening December 5.

***The Lyons* runs through August 18 at SART in Owen Theatre on the campus of Mars Hill University. For details and tickets, visit sartplays.com.**

Photos courtesy of SART.



The Lyons family is portrayed by, from left, Maximilian Koger, Callan White, Michael Mattison and Chelsey Mirheli.

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Separate Beds at Flat Rock Playhouse, July 2019. Photo by Treadshots.

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