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Beguiling *The Friendly Hour* captures essence of women's club

By John Busbee – May 10, 2019

The new kid on the block came out of the gates smoking hot, giving its opening night audience a masterfully crafted theatrical journey which will resonate well into the future. Theatre Midwest made its entrance into Iowa's theatre scene with the Iowa premiere of Tom Jacobson's *The Friendly Hour*. If good first impressions are the mark of a successful meeting, then this company has made a "light up the room" entrance. With only a four-performance opening show, grab your tickets fast. This is a must-see for any good cultural adventurer.

Jacobson has a bit of his heart and heredity infused into this wonderful script. Based on the minutes from his aunt's mother and the South Dakota women's social club she belonged to, *The Friendly Hour* has brilliantly distilled the club's 70+ year history into an engaging and evocative, soul-searching experience. The five-member, all-woman cast is a five-star blending of the real-life club members. He painted his script with subtle shadings and occasional vibrant explosions of color. *The Friendly Hour* drills deeply into the heart and soul as we become invested in the characters and the complexities of their relationships.

Under Tom Woldt's deft directorial hand, this quintet of very talented actors quickly lock in their characters and the setting. We begin in the Great Depression, following the lives of a band of women seeking connection and commune in each other's company. They find a spiritual oasis with each other, in the unforgiving Upper Midwest prairielands of South Dakota. Sometimes, however, storms travel through their oasis. Woldt crafts this story with marvelous pacing, often layering the dialogue with realistic ebbs and flows of interplay. This cast breathes special energy into Jacobson's script, carrying the story clearly through its mesmerizing paces.

Anchoring this club are strong-willed, "get'er done" Dorcas Briggie (given rock solid vibrance by the gifted Jami Bassman Ahart) and her counterpart, the opinionated Effie Voss (with Emily Solo brilliantly filling her role with a steely edged poise). These two capture every nuance of their characters and, more importantly, their richly complex relationship. Dorcas is willing to tackle any chore, while Effie assails her fellow club members with the fact that she is the only college-educated member.

Rebecca Haroldson gives her Wava Jamtgaard a vulnerability and meekness that belie her inner strengths. As the outgoing Opal Zweifel, Tiffany Flory brings wonderful believability to her Opal. Deidra Mohr showcases her chameleonic gifts as she portrays a range of eight different characters, each with its own well-defined personality. The physicality and locked in persona she gives each role is delightful, from her initial Swedish speaking Isabelle Hagen to her swaggering cowgirl to her doddering elderly lady.

These five women deliver a memorable, unique performing arts experience. Guided by focused direction, a superb ensemble and enveloped by a solid production design concept, *The Friendly Hour* leaves its profound imprint within our souls.

The production's design adds many visual elements further enhancing this show's impact. Amber Miller's scenic design gives us a slightly surreal feel with see-through walls, lighting (Rick Goetz), the sound design (Tom Woldt) and projections. Stephanie Eggert's costuming adds an authenticity to these characters, coupled with Katie Privitera's hair and makeup work. A textured diversity of dialects was spot-on, thanks to Ann Woldt's dialect coaching.

This show is a masterful immersion into an historically-based bit of Americana. *The Friendly Hour* honors the club rituals, often to the audience's delight, to its contests, to its treasurer's report and dues collection – and, where contributions would go to benefit the community, such as the library – to each adjournment. After which, "a tasty lunch was served" – at least, in most cases. With the warmth and appeal of an edgy Norman Rockwell, *The Friendly Hour* will satisfy. And, Theatre Midwest not only has made a great first impression, but easily passed the initial interview. We look forward to future contributions in the Midwest, as this show indicates a strong future for this company.