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Meet 'The Nerd' at Bucks County Playhouse



There are so many fine plays that have stood the test of time and been revived regularly. Some are timeless and express universal themes. Others reflect a comedic force that keeps audiences laughing years after they first appeared. Larry Shue's, "The Nerd," which opened in Milwaukee in 1981, and played in England a year later, ran for over 400 performances on Broadway, some 30 years ago. Sadly, this comedy doesn't have the staying power to make it relevant or humorous enough to carry it to 2017, where it is currently playing at Bucks County Playhouse.

There are so many ways to describe a nerd. In fact, it is a new word. It was first introduced by children's author, Dr. Seuss in 1950, as a character in a book, "If I Ran the Zoo." Over the years, the definition has varied a little — from someone is boring to someone who is singularly obsessed with one thing. But is always someone who lacks social skills.

The play begins with three characters, any of whom can pass as a nerd, but alas, the nerd hasn't arrived. When he does, we know who he is — his clothes, his horned rimmed-glasses, his weird voice, his demeanor. This stereotype might still pass on some TV sitcoms, but I found it tedious. Sadly, I found most of the play tedious.

Willum (Kyle Cameron), Tansy (Clea Alsip), and Axel (Gavin Lee) are buddies, living in Terre Haute, Indiana in 1979. Willum likes Tansy, but doesn't seem to be able to make a move on her. Their friend Axel, a theater reviewer who seems to hate theater, provides a thin comic relief. They are entertaining Warnock Waldgrave (Grant Shaud) for a dinner, but also so Axel can solidify his contract for the architectural work he is doing for him. Into the mix comes Rick Steadman (Joe Kinosian), the man who anonymously rescued Axel from certain death in the jungles of Viet Nam some years earlier. Oh yeah, he's the nerd. He's also over-the-top goofy.

The problem for me was that there was little chemistry. We have to have a stake in a character or characters. We need to care. While the piece is a clever one, at times, the director (Marc Vietor) must bring to the audience, more than some funny lines and a few clever bits. Vietor doesn't get far beyond the adolescent humor.

I get no pleasure in panning a play. When I feel this way, I ask myself if it's just me. This time, I took the liberty of asking a few other audience members as we filed out, what they thought. They too were disappointed. In fact, in each case, it was their first time to the Bucks County Playhouse, and I found myself telling them how superb their previous two plays were. "Clue" and "The Buddy Holly Story" set a high bar. The Nerd didn't make it over.

"The Nerd," by Larry Shue, is on stage through July 15 at Bucks County Playhouse, 70 Main St., New Hope, PA 18938. Call 215-862-2121 or check bctheater.org.