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Bucks County Review: 'The Nerd'

By Neal Zoren

The characters in “The Nerd” are playing a game, “I am on a Trip.” Starting with the letter A they have to name items they are taking with them in alphabetical order, each contestant memorizing and reciting the items the others have chosen before adding theirs. It’s one of the many jokes, gags, and gimmicks Larry Shue loads into his 1981 comedy, being given a clockwork-precise production at New Hope’s Bucks County Playhouse.

Laughs are already percolating when the title character (a hilarious Joe Kinosian) breaks the rhythm, and spirit, of the game, one he suggested, by saying something totally off-kilter when he has his turn, his letter being E. The payoff, subtle but explosive, comes when the most conventional of the players, a real estate developer with an untraceable sense of humor (Grant Shaud), supplying the G, quietly but acidly, looks right at the nerd, and croaks out the word, gun.

Shaud is fine-tuned and perfectly pitched in his delivery. He leaves no doubt about his intended menace and exactly where he would aim his nominated weapon. And Shaud’s timing is indicative of Marc Vietor’s sharp production.

Shue’s farce looks like a throwback today. No one, not even Ken Ludwig, is writing pieces that revolve totally around a series of gaffes, mishaps, and behavior beyond toleration. Vietor and company are dealing with a style of comedy that has seen its day and makes you wonder why that day has passed.

There is nothing socially redeeming or morally pointed in “The Nerd.” Thank goodness. Though there is a love story and a surprise ending to drive some action, its purpose is to entertain and give actors the chance to show off some of their wackier stuff. Construction is what matters, and Shue, sadly taken in a plane crash at the prime of his career, age 39, is a master.

“The Nerd” is chocked with plot loops, comic chutes and ladders, and one-liners that often have daggers lurking under their surface message. One character’s comments and retorts are more openly coated with venom. Shue, for some reason, made him a theater critic (Gavin Lee), one who has such a tight deadline, he has to leave performances a half-hour before they end. For all he knows, “Hamlet” gets the girl and lives happily ever after. And he composes his reviews in advance.

“The Nerd” depends on an audience latching on to Shue’s main gambit: an architect (Kyle Cameron) tolerates an irritating surprise guest, a fellow soldier who saved the architect in a rice paddy in Vietnam

and whom the architect lauds as a hero.

Shue is smart in the way he goes about his business. The architect has never met the soldier who saved him. He knows only his name and once made a vow to be there for him if he ever needed anything. He's also smart in concocting devices. The nerd arrives as the critic is throwing the architect a surprise birthday party, co-hosted and catered by a woman (Clea Alsip) for whom the architect has shared romantic feelings. The nerd, working from a message on a now obsolete telephone answering machine, thinks it's a Halloween gathering and comes dressed as a monster, which scares a child into what is expected to be lifelong trauma. Shue applies Murphy's Law. What can go wrong does — with brio.

Vietor, his cast, and sound designer Greg Pliska are as clever as Shue. Even the starkly ugly 1970s apartment and period clothes from 1979 that now seem ghastly are right. The Bucks County troupe understands its material and makes the rollicking most of it.

Kinosian, as he's demonstrated in his own show, "Murder for Two," is about as deft at farce and assaying outlandish characters as you can get. Best is he never makes the nerd endearing. Like the critic and meteorologist, you thank the nerd for his past heroism but don't forgive him any of his shenanigans, all of which Kinosian plays with aplomb.

Cameron is excellent as the character in the middle of everything. He radiates frustration on several levels and finds the right notes in the architect's multi-pronged angst to elicit both laughs and empathy.

Lee should be hired for every part that requires spitfire sarcasm delivered with flare. Known mostly for his gravity-defying dancing, Lee opens a whole new career avenue with his sharpshooter's knack for landing Shue's verbal salvos.

Alsip is the model of a reasonable person coping with several trying situations. Not only is her boyfriend saddled with the most annoying of albatrosses, but she is leaving soon after the birthday party to accept a weather casting gig at a D.C. television station. The coolness and cleverness Alsip conveys fuels and gives contrast to the more antic characters.

Zuzanna Szadkowski is just a marvel. She has the most thankless part, a teacher and counselor who accompanies her businessman husband to an employee's party. Little is built in for Szadkowski, but she capitalizes on the counselor's role, always staying calm and trying to be psychologically wise when utter mayhem is afoot. She also maximizes her character's coping method, breaking cheap saucers she carries with her in her purse. Watching Szadkowski carefully prepare her pottery for destruction, and seeing her produce the hammer she also keeps in her purse, are priceless moments of quiet but side-splitting comedy.

And Shaud does the work cut out for him. He plays his character as a total no-nonsense guy who doesn't care whether the nerd saved the architect's life or not. He sees the nerd as an idiot, hates being involved in his craziness, and expresses himself with due anger and unconstrained action. Despite his character being the one who refuses to tolerate multiple mishaps, Shaud fits into Vietor's comic tone and makes his businessman, who is only trying to get a hotel designed and built, as funny as anyone on stage.

Annie Simon went to town in designing 1970s outfits, including a hint of bell bottoms. The monster costume is also a gem. The dress she chooses for Alsip shows the difference between what a TV personality wore 40 years ago in comparison to now. And Greg Pliska's sound design is like an eighth

character. So much depends on garbled telephone messages, and they are constructed beautifully, meshing in rhythm with Shue's script and Vietor's pinpoint direction.

The Nerd, Bucks County Playhouse, 70 South Main Street, New Hope. Through Saturday, July 15. \$40 to \$75. 215-862-2121 or www.bcptheater.org.