

Get knocked out by Sheldon's winning '3-Hole Punch'

By Charles Kondek

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The Grange in the center of Copake is again reverberating with the sounds of live theater. "3-Hole Punch," a collection of new one-act plays is being admirably presented there under the auspices of their author, newly arrived Columbia County playwright, James Sheldon. The co-producer of the special offering is actor Gary Cookson.

The three vastly different works at first seem to have no connection - nor do they need to, as each can stand on its own - but on closer inspection the theme that runs through out seems to concern getting one's fair share of the pie, about not being short-changed, about how does one deal or not deal with being denied that which one feels one richly deserves.

The first of the three-hand evening is "Patterns of the Sky." It opens as a young wife (Karen Lee) finishes a hushed, hurried phone conversation just as her rich, financier husband (Gary Cookson) returns from a morning tennis game. Having out-matched a superior opponent, he feels a bit frisky. She is off to go shopping; friskiness will have to wait. Both agree to spend the evening apart. It is clear from the outset that one deeply cares for the other, but the wife thinks she should be offered more and the husband feels he deserves more. Neither is satisfied; no one is truly sated. They are much like the birds that repeatedly fly into the huge window of their summer house thinking there is something better on the other side of the plate glass, and all they get for their efforts are sore heads, broken wings.

Cookson and Lee are evenly matched, and the acting is on the highest level. In fact, the acting is on the highest level throughout the evening. The entire production bespeaks a professionalism of the highest praise-worthy caliber.

"Cowboys and Indians" is just that, guns and arrows. Brothers meet to discuss the seemingly unfair distribution of their dead mother's estate. A gun is brought out threateningly into play (by Karl Malden look-alike Mark Sternlof) to get an edge in the negotiations. Tensions build and 'arrows' fly until Michael (Jim Beaudin) produces a trump card of his own, not to be revealed here. Again the writing is literate and compelling.

In "Closing Bars," (there is a pun here; drinking bars and bars of music), Darren, an amazing Charlie Tirrell, is a seriously depressed, borderline alcoholic, amateur song writer, whose wife has left him. He clearly believes he's another George Gershwin or Cole Porter. Ninety-five percent of the action takes place in high rise hotel elevator, ingeniously designed and built by designer, sculptor Tavia Ito. Darren is staying at the expensive hotel, in town for a 'song writers' convention.

Snatches of famous pop tunes are frequently sung by Tirrell in a pleasing warm tenor voice, the lyrics acting as dialogue. It's a clever effect allowing us a clearer picture of someone living in a different world altogether, and Tirrell is quite moving. The elevator operator, Hudson native Paul Carter, listens with the typical sympathetic bartender's ear to Tirrell's ramblings. Dressed in his black operator's uniform perched ominous, granite-like, impenetrable, on a tall stool (the grim reaper?) he offers Darren a way out of his predicament.

The physical production can not be faulted. Mainly consisting of three various-sized wood and canvas panels, Ito quickly and accurately defines locale. The design also allows lighting designer Jason Goldman to 'paint' with light - walls go from blue to yellow to gray - affording effortless visual variety.

The spot-on costumes by designer Charles Tomlinson are also a major contribution to the evening's success.

"3-Hole Punch" does indeed supply a good punch, or perhaps three. A minor caveat: each of the three plays has a slightly melodramatic, O'Henry-type ending, coming from out of left field. However, due to the honesty of the acting and the sensitive handling by Broadway-veteran director Thomas Gruenewald, easily mitigating the situation, the resulting denouement of each play is thoroughly believable; just as it should and must be.

Sheldon is a skilled craftsman with a sharp-focused eye and a pitch-perfect ear for dialogue, and I am eager to see more of his work. The production closes this weekend. For information and tickets, call 845.677.4446 or email jsheldon@littletownviews.com.

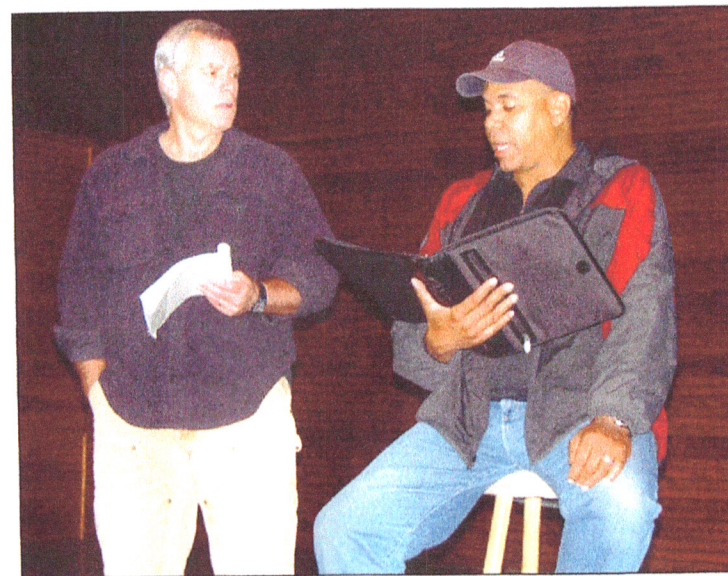


Photo courtesy of James Sheldon

Paul Carter (right) and Charlie Tirrell rehearse a scene from James Sheldon's play, "3-Hole Punch"