

Manager Melissa Daroff, it's also effectively framed by a splendidly crammed hotel room setting, which is overly crowded with fascinating showbiz memorabilia designed by Gary Decker. This deftly written, genuinely comic exploration of old age, animosity overcome, and ultimate renewal, is now playing through May 22. (My Grade:4.5)

LOOKING FOR NORMAL

Review by Norm Gross

At the intimate Abbott Memorial Theater in Waltham, Mass. is the Hovey Players production of "Looking for Normal," a new play by Jane Anderson. It premiered in Los Angeles in 2001 and was presented as an HBO Cable-TV motion picture (re-titled "Normal") in 2003. This staging marks its Boston premiere. Set in a small, average mid-western town, Roy stuns his wife (for 25 years) by announcing that he sees himself as a woman trapped in a man's body, and has decided to undergo a sex-change operation. Unproductive marriage counseling with their church's befuddled pastor, outraged, contemptuous rebellion from Wayne, their 22 year old eldest son (barnstorming far and wide with a local rock band), and bemused acceptance from Patty Ann, their feisty young teenaged daughter follows with Roy's sobbing wife Irma demanding that he "Get out of their house!" After his transformation becomes a reality, gradually with many months of soul searching, and trenchant discussions, Irma comes to realize that she still loves "him," no matter the gender change, and they both then try to establish a new relationship built on understanding and acceptance. Meanwhile, Roy's elderly parents, who still live at a far distance in the rural farmhouse, where Roy spent his childhood, remain largely uninvolved in their son's stormy situation. At various other times the playwright surprisingly introduces a succession of flashbacks to the 1920's during which time Roy's flamboyant grandmother (fashionably outfitted in jacket, blouse, and slacks) recounts how she abandoned her family back then, to travel widely and live a sexually liberated and freewheeling lifestyle. Near the play's conclusion also, in a poignant moment of final farewell, Roy returns as a daughter, to visit his dying uncomprehending Alzheimer- distressed father. Passionately acted by the fine, intense nine member cast with potent performances by both John Tierney as Roy, and Kate Tonner as Irma, with especially compelling portrayals by Steve Travieso as their son Wayne and Daria da Silveira as Patty Ann, their young daughter, with Renee Tyzbit, noteworthy as Roy's freethinking grandmother, all under Michelle M. Aguilon's well focused direction. Unfortunately, as conceived by the playwright, the few flashback's to Roy's unfettered "Jazz-Age" grandmother's uninhibited lifestyle seemed awkwardly established and insufficiently connected to either Roy's father, who back at that time was very young when he was forsaken, or to the major and disruptive family turmoil that Roy's dramatic and far reaching decision caused. In all other respects, this is a well staged, vividly acted, and highly involving family drama. Now playing through May 21.

(My Grade: 4)

TOOTH AND CLAW

Review by Norm Gross

At the Boston Center for the Arts the Zeitgeist Stage Company presents its production of "Tooth and Claw," a new play by Michael Holliger. The play's title is taken from a poem by Tennyson. First presented in Philadelphia in 2003, it was also staged successfully off-Broadway last year and this presentation represents its Boston premiere. Set in the Galapagos Islands and based on actual events in the 1990's, Dr. Schuyler Baines, a young prominent female environmentalist, newly appointed as Director of the Island's "Darwin Research Station," has just arrived to help prevent the potential extinction of the area's endangered giant tortoises. These huge animals are threatened not only by the island's wild goats, who are directly competing with them over the rapidly depleting natural food supply, but also primarily from the Isle's fishermen. These aggressive local rivals must now depend for their own survival on their illegal over-fishing of the region's abundant sea-cucumbers. Thought to enhance sexual prowess, a huge demand in Japan has developed for their export. Unfortunately, although a highly qualified specialist, Dr. Schuyler doesn't speak Spanish, (although she's trying to learn a bit), knows little about the Islands, its people, or their customs, and is ill-prepared to compromise or try to even relate effectively with them. Determined to protect the jeopardized tortoises at all costs, she enrages the fishermen by exerting political pressure to outlaw their illicit harvesting. They react very violently by confronting the Research Station and placing it under full siege. The play's central issues of the necessary balance between human needs and environmental imperatives is then adroitly explored by the playwright. The many differing aspects of "survival of the fittest" are deftly introduced. Dr. Schuyler is quite aware that Carlos Zaval, her accomplished gay Latino subordinate, had been bypassed as Director, although he was obviously more in step with the Islanders' attitudes, culture and needs than she was. Ana, her very pregnant native secretary, repeatedly nettles her with provocative questions and/or observations that compel Schuyler to rethink and justify her insistence of the rights of the turtles over those of the fishermen. Malcolm Geary, the area's elderly, long time scholar and philosopher, regularly pontificates on the many sides of ecology and concludes by revealing that he had much more than just a casual relationship with Schuyler's eminent, deceased mother. Lisa Morse is effectively commanding as Dr. Schuyler Baines, with solid support from the accomplished ten member cast (many of whom not only effectively personify the region's vehement aggrieved fishermen, but also soulfully chant poignant folk songs, while accompanying themselves on guitars). Luis Negrón as Carlos Zavala, Ed Peed as Malcolm Geary, and Nydia Calon as the secretary, all offer strong performances. David J. Miller's well paced direction and his