

Clean house, dirty deeds

Green Candle pairs divergent tones of playwrights Campbell and Goldberg in one night of theater

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“Cleaning Day” by Maura Campbell is a subtle, sensitive and thoughtful play. “Don and Tom” by Stephen Goldberg is a brash, frightening and thoughtful play. That last common quality is enough to unite the two works in the current production by the Green Candle Theatre Company, which is staging both 45-minute one-act plays at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts.

Other than the thought-provoking thread that marks their work, Campbell and Goldberg have little in common other than being Burlington’s most prolific and respected playwrights for the past couple of decades. The juxtaposition of their two works in one night dubbed “Sacred & Profane” provides a sweet-and-sour note showing the range of theater in general and more specifically of Vermont’s playwriting talent.

“Cleaning Day” started opening night Wednesday with a young woman named Jenny (played by Geneva MacPhail) arriving at the home of an older woman named Iona (Tracey Girdich), ostensibly to clean the house the day after a suicide. At first, Jenny seems to be consoling Iona after a tragedy happened in her home. As the day unfolds, though, Iona starts to take a motherly role in the life of the reticent Jenny, urging the divorced mother of two to quit smoking and take more photos of her children.

The women, clearly, are offering therapy to each other, and it’s carried through the play on the theme of cleaning as healing ritual. “Cleaning Day,” one of Campbell’s first scripts, is about two decades old, and its tone would show up years later in the celebrated 2004 Sarah Ruhl play “The Clean House.” By play’s end it’s hard to tell if the two women are healed, but the first step — cleansing — has definitely begun.

“Cleaning Day,” which Campbell directed, rises above its quiet approach thanks to the strong bond created between the two actresses. Girdich, as the woman who’s been a widow for less than 24 hours, gives her character the grief, confusion and occasional bursts of irrational humor her circumstance would likely create. The mysterious Jenny is less clearly defined, and MacPhail portrays her as much more deeply wounded than we’ll ever come to understand in a one-act play.

A 15-minute intermission is all that separates the tenderness of “Cleaning Day” from the onslaught of harsh words and images Goldberg stuffs in the short play “Don and Tom.” As with most Goldberg plays, though, there’s plenty of room for dark humor, which makes “Don and Tom” a rewarding if unsettling ride.

The play centers on, well, Don and Tom, both of whom are imprisoned for murder. Don (Aaron Masi) is a big, loud, scary dude, while Tom (Alex Dostie) is a meek, creepy man-boy who, as flashbacks show, was physically abused by his parents (Ben Ash and Girdich, who like MacPhail has a small role in the nightcap).

“Don and Tom” plays at times like a restless dream, with Don’s intense if sometimes humorous rants and Tom’s disassociated if frequently humorous rants carrying the script into surrealist territory. It’s also strongly grounded in a tough, “Cuckoo’s Nest”-styled reality as Don tries to form a bond with the un-bondable Tom before their time together in their cell runs completely out.

For all their smart wordplay, Goldberg’s scripts rarely try to overtly say anything. You can strain to decipher a morality tale about crime and punishment or the hypocrisy of religion (Ash also turns in a funny performance as a slimy prison priest), but Goldberg never fully commits to a message, which gives his work its elusive depth.

Goldberg, like Campbell, directs his own play, and fills the Off Center with discordant cymbal crashes and irritating staccato percussion that reflect the unstable tension in the two men’s minds. Masi is wild and woolly as Don, making his character both dangerously tenacious and endearingly funny, such as when he pleads with a judge to let him go so he can tend to all his dependents, including his ant farm. Dostie’s high-energy performance makes Tom’s inner child an outer child who has never been able to confront the horrible things he did or process the horrible things that were done to him when he was young.

There’s no redemption in “Don and Tom” like the signs of salvation that mark “Cleaning Day.” That’s OK, though; both plays, despite their divergent tones, have one other important quality in common: They stay true to themselves.