Rocket Shines In Studio City

By DAVID TILLINGER

For the past month, some of the best acting in Hollywood has been taking place at the Cast of Characters theatre in Studio City. The Los Angeles Repertory Company's production of Clifford Odets' "Rocket to the Moon" has been playing to enthusiastic audiences and glowing reviews. The play, originally presented in 1938, is one of those works which remains timeless and grows in each telling. Odets, who also wrote "The Country Girl" among other things, considered "Rocket" to be his best work.

As good as the play itself is, the acting is better. The truest test of acting is not what is said, but what is shown. The cast of "Rocket" is a veteran one, a underlies each character with depth. John Herzog plays Ben Stark, a defeated man for whom life has become a burden. Herzog creates a great sympathy for this man without eliciting pity. Stark is trapped in a loveless marriage to a dominating woman, Belle. Laura Gardner gives Belle considerable depth, turning what could have been a two-dimensional shrew into a strong woman trying to save her marriage and improve her life with her husband.

Into this mix enters beautiful, glowing Cleo Singer. Cleo is a young woman in love with life and Reo Danzelle, who plays her, shines through the depression which marks not only the Starks, but the rest of the characters as well.

Following the advice of his father-in-law, Mr. Prince, Ben succumbs to temptation and begins an affair with Cleo, only to find that he is not her only suitor. Mr. Prince, played by Robert Ellenstein, has joined the hunt. Mr. Ellenstein's Prince is a joy to watch, a scoundrel who lives in a world marked by realism and bitterness, only wanting to have someone to bring a bit of light in. Also joining the fray is Willy Wax (Paul Carr). Carr plays Wax as a complete cad who is only interested in molesting Cleo, all the while promising to help her succeed as a dancer.

Filling out the cast are Alex Henteloff and Alan Safier as fellow doctors in Ben Stark's office. Henteloff is exceptional as the down-on-his-luck Dr. Cooper. He gives this comical character an element of basic pathos which immediately garners sympathy and makes you out-and-out like him. Safier plays the roguish Frenchy, a sarcastic man who unleashes barbs at a breakneck pace.

"Rocket" is directed by Peter Ellenstein, who's father plays Mr. Prince. Ellenstein's direction is impeccable as the action never lags. Ellenstein is a veteran stage director as well as an actor both on stage and TV. In describing his attraction to the piece, the director explained, "It rings true inner alarms, striking hard at the core of life and love - It is real."

The technical work is exceptional, from Jim Freiburger's perfect set to Robert Pickering's mood enhancing lighting. Alicia MacCarone's costumes also help establish the mood.

As the plays says, "The things I don't know would fill a book," but one thing I do know is that you should go see "Rocket to the Moon".

"Rocket to the Moon" is now playing in Studio City to enthusiastic audiences and glowing reviews.

Plays Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. Tickets are $17.50 on Friday and Saturday, and $15 on Thursday and Sunday. The Cast of Characters theatre is located over Jerry's Deli in Studio City.

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