

New play on life and death of Inge raises curtain on festival

By GARY MITCHELL
Guest Reviewer

The 25th Annual William Inge Festival opened Wednesday night with the world premiere of Marcia Cebulka's specially commissioned play on the life and death of William Inge, a play called "Touched." It was more than a fitting opening to an event that this year will not honor a new American playwright of note but instead celebrates the history of the festival itself and William Inge in particular.

Cebulka, a playwright now living in Topeka and a former Inge Center playwright-in-residence who lived at the Inge home, was originally asked to write a one-man play about William Inge that might be used as an instructional aid in schools. What she and Peter Ellenstein, the festival's artistic director and director of this production, have come up with goes light years beyond a didactic show-and-tell for the classroom.

"Touched" has evolved into a two-person play. William Inge is played with great depth of feeling by John Herzog; the second actor, Carmen Thomas, portrays a wide range of characters, from the allegorical "Hope" through Inge's mother, the flamboyant Tennessee Williams, the unstable Barbara Baxley, Inge's psychiatrist, Inge's sister, and his high-school sweetheart, with a deftness and sureness that makes such legerdemain look easy. The two veteran actors worked through rapidly shifting scenes, changing an article of clothing here or adding a simple prop there, always in character and always in focus.

There is nothing easy about the task that playwright Cebulka has set for the two actors or the team of behind-the-scenes wizards. The play starts with the sound of a car engine switched on and then a heart beat, projected images of Inge's life, symbolic use of lighting and color, and swaths of curtains that suggest the delicacy of peach blossoms and the fragility of life itself. Having the two actors carry all the lines of the play while at the same time juggling all the technical challenges is onerous, but Herzog and Thomas covered any slip-ups with professional poise. Each provided a veritable tour-de-force of acting virtuosity.

There is also nothing facile about Cebulka's examination of the life and death of William Inge. Starting the play with his attempting suicide is a neat stroke. Many individuals in the audience no doubt arrived at the play



UNHAPPY TIME — Thomas, left, as Barbara Baxley, and Herzog, as William Inge, perform a scene in which Inge remembers a fight he had with Baxley after the part he wrote for her was cast to someone else.

(Photos by Nick Wright)

(knowing that Inge committed suicide at the age of 60 in 1973. And even they didn't know that, the subtitle of the play gives it away: "The last 2.0

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heartbeats of William Inge." The suspense, then, is not whether Inge will do it but rather what led him to do it.

Not that the play gives an easy answer. Cebulka's creation of Inge (based on her research of his life) shows a complex individual who from time to time in his life teeters on the brink of insanity brought on by alcoholism, homosexuality, and his need to escape his own torment. He finds no happiness in the very success that he achieves. He can't stand to be around the crowds of people attending his plays and applauding his accomplishments. He does not feel he belongs in New York or in Hollywood, and he can't go home again.

When his run of successful Broadway shows comes to an end and he strikes out three times in a row, he faces the sting of defeat, of changing times, of hostile critics. He goes on to win an Oscar for his screenplay for "Splendor in the Grass" but that only thrusts him into the glare of the paparazzi, something he cannot abide.

The irony of a playwright who wrote so movingly about the family but who could never establish a relationship with a woman to have a family of his own; a playwright who felt his artistic integrity was the most important thing in life and yet in his personal life acted contrary to the morals he had been taught to respect; a man who - in Cebulka's description and Herzog's portrayal - may have suffered as much from shyness and claustrophobia as he did from homosexuality is made bare on the boards.

The script also uses humor to good effect. In fact, the audience's prolonged laughter and louder-than-expected guffaws might have caught the actors by surprise. Cebulka's witty references to early Independence history and Inge's characters and some of the lines from his plays didn't go unnoticed by the opening-night audience. How a less knowledgeable audience will react remains to be seen.

The title of the play "Touched" alerts the audience to the use of the word throughout the play, in some telling ways. But in case anyone in the audience didn't catch those references, Cebulka adds a scene between Tennessee Williams and Inge that plays pedantically and perhaps is not really needed. The English poet Lord Byron is quoted by Williams:

"We of the craft are all crazy, some are affected by gaiety, others by melancholy, but all are more or less touched." And then later he elaborates: "The gods are angry. We creative types are messin' in their yard and they are jealous. So they touch us with a bit of somethin'. A bit of genius or madness. An extraordinary sensitivity to the brightness of a daffodil. A fragile nature. An uncanny ability to observe human longing. They set us apart just enough to make us seem a bit odd. We're 'touched,' you and me. The trick is to keep from being 'crushed.'"

Inge was crushed as well as touched by life. Tennessee Williams was not crushed. Because he was not, Williams comes across as a more interesting character due to that scene, upstaging the character of Inge.