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STAGE: 'VOICE OF TURTLE,' AT INTAR;f818

By JENNIFER DUNNING

THE VOICE OF THE TURTLE," John Van Druten's sweetly funny but tissue-thin ode to spring, young love and life in the theater, is being heard once more, more than 35 years after it was written, in a very different time. The Intar Theater has taken the plunge, and it is a good revival that it is offering, one that manages for the most part to conjure up the past with the immediacy of the present.

Neil Prince's overstuffed set plunges us instantly into a time when apartments could be sublet, sudden rainstorms started enduring romances and girls worried about "promiscuity." A small glowing Art Deco radio burbles out "Mama, I'm Off to Yokohama." But in another corner, Sally Middleton, a Joplin-born actress between jobs, charges breathlessly through a script of "Romeo and Juliet." Cover the blue chintz on which she sits with Haitian cotton, and she could be any young actress today, daydreaming of the big role.

Her friend Olive Lashbrooke arrives for a drink and some frivolous, actressy talk of life and love. Her date for the evening arrives, but Olive dumps him for a more likely prospect. Sally is left to entertain Olive's date, a soldier on leave who, without a hotel room in crowded wartime New York, spends a night on her couch, and then the next night in her bed. Sally is scatterbrained but wise. Older and even wiser, Bill has lost his belief in love, but by the end of their weekend, he has found it again.

Karen Jablons, the original flat-chested Val of "A Chorus Line," is a touching Sally. The inflections are pure 1980's, but she is that knowing innocent of the war years, all fits and starts and confused notions about love. Her fuzzy anxieties about the loneliness of unslept-in beds and radios playing in empty rooms have nothing to play off, however, for the role of Bill has been seriously miscast. James J. Mellon has a boyish grin, and in Bill's moments of unstudied gentleness he is fine. He has a good moment at the end, talking suddenly of unhappiness. But he is far too young and earnest. A line referring to Bill's experienced years has been cut from this production, but in the mouth of an actor who looks and at times speaks like a refugee from "Grease," the quotations from Milton and the Bible and the reflective talk of love lost in Paris have the ring of uneasy circumlocution.

But there's always Caitlin O'Heaney's Olive to pick up the pace. Miss O'Heaney is a wonder. With a well-practiced movie-star drawl, big eyes that snap like exclamation points and impeccable timing, she roars through the play like a tornado, playing just at the edge of fatal broadness, yet never losing the edge of sadness that lies under Olive's bitchy humor.

Under the direction of Mitchell Ivers, the two women play with the simplicity necessary for a fragile comic period play. Cinthia Waas designed the nicely detailed period clothes. "The Voice of the Turtle," seen Sunday, will play at Intar through next Sunday.

In Another Time VOICE OF THE TURTLE, by John Van Druten;

directed by Mitchell Ivers;

set design, Neil Prince,

lighting design, Christine Wopat;

costume design, Cinthia Waas;

sound design, Tom Nelson;

productions stage manager, Lori Muttersbach.

Presented by Karen Weinschenker.

At the Intar Theater, 420 West 42d Street.

Sally Middleton .....Karen Jablons

Olive Lashbrooke .....Caitlin O'Heaney

Bill Page .....James J. Mellon