



TED BRELLISFORD, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Scott Broe as Alex Docker, Derrek Peels as Gregor, Heather Hunter as Grace and Stephen Fletcher as Walter happily chew up the scenery in Aldershot Players' funny dinner entertainment, *Saving Grace*.

Pants off, hopes high in funny dinner play

Saving Grace

Who: Aldershot Players

Where: West Plains United Church,

549 Plains Rd. W., Burlington

When: continues Oct. 18-20, 26-27, dinner at 6:30 p.m., show at 8 p.m.

Please note: show only Oct. 18

Tickets: \$29 includes dinner, \$12 show only

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By GARY SMITH

Special to The Hamilton Spectator

Talk about compromising positions.

We're hardly into the first act of *Saving Grace*, Jack Sharkey's frivolous little after-dinner comedy, and already telephone repairman Alex Docker has his pants off and his hopes high.

Grace Larkin, whose kitschy little 1970s New York apartment he happens to be visiting, is perambulating the perimeter decked out in a flimsy grass skirt and a plastic flower lei.

Each is talking at cross purposes that would defy analysis by a good shrink.

Each is attracted to the physical contours of the other, though they've barely just met.

Well, before sex can rear its delightful head, and Alex can gently steer Grace towards the afghan-covered sofa in the corner, all hell breaks loose.

Grace's boss Walter returns to film the pair with his hand-held camera. Why isn't exactly clear. But rest assured it allows a perfect entry into Sharkey's madness and mayhem for Grace's straight-laced sister Harriet, visiting from Chillicothe, Ohio.

Are we surprised at Harriet's preposterous, rather unfortunate entrance at this untimely juncture in Sharkey's play? Of course not.

By now we know where we are.

We know just the sort of play Sharkey has written. Short on logic, long on farce. It hasn't a serious moment in its delightfully brainless two hours of dinner-theatre entertainment.

No, there's none of the inventive plot construction that crackles through Neil Simon's *Barefoot In The Park*, a comedy of roughly the same vintage.

And no, there's none of the barefaced insight into character that makes a gentle little soufflé of a comedy like Bernard Slade's *Same Time Next Year* so delightfully engaging.

Sharkey simply isn't in that class. Turning out tidbits that titillate, he has had big-time middle-America success with comedies leeringly titled *Bottoms Up*, *How Green Was My Brownie* and *Turkey In The Straw*.

So what saves *Saving Grace* from drowning in an ocean of TV sit-com mentality?

An inventive director and a crack cast, of course.

Played fast and furious, this madcap comedy keeps us engaged.

Allowed to languish? It would flop on the Aldershot stage like the carcass of last week's dead turkey.

Fortunately, director Sam Sidawi has pumped this troublesome comedy to life, sending it scrambling across the tiny stage of West Plains United Church in a dash to a 10 p.m. finish.

And his cast, a top group of farceurs, have infused it with the energy of a thirsty band of hot-throttled hyenas heading for the balm of cool water.

The cast makes a terrific meal of every insane Sharkey sight gag. They also creep up on you with some inane, preposterous one-liners, making the most ludicrous things seem funny.

Scott Broe is terrific as Alex Docker. He has a natural and innocent charm that permits him to slip in and out of Alex's pants with good grace and aplomb.

And Heather Hunter, with a mischievous leer in her mascaraed eye and a voice that crackles like spun sugar, makes a sweetly endearing Grace Larkin, in or out of a hula skirt.

The rest of the characters in Sharkey's play wisely keep their clothes on for the duration of the evening. But each is fetching all the same.

Stephen Fletcher has just the right sense of stuffiness and sass to make Walter Chepple a tad more than a Sharkey stereotype.

And Jamie Cortese as Harriet, got up here in the most preposterous purple dress, wriggles her way around the stage, eyes wide with blazing disbelief, hands perpetually in motion.

Derrek Peels, though not quite believable as a Russian emigre evangelist, is terrific at taking the barebones of a character, far removed from himself, and reimagining him as some silver-throated Oral Roberts clone. It's far and away the best thing Peels has done.

Saving Grace is nicely set against Rosalyn Woodcock's authentic looking 1970s apartment. With the look and feel of cheap digs in Jackson Heights, it hugs the period perfectly, replete with avocado-green plastic chairs and a hideous macrame lampshade.

Chuck Learn and director Sidawi have provided a nicely ironic soundtrack that transports us, perhaps kicking and screaming, to the commercial goo of 1970s pop music.

What could be more perfect, after all, than The Monkees and The Partridge Family to provide aural support for a happy-go-lucky comedy straight off the boob tube?

Call me low-brow, but I loved it.

Gary Smith has been reviewing dance and theatre for The Hamilton Spectator for more than 20 years. The award-winning critic also directs shows in the Hamilton area.