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by Scott McCrea For the News-Miner

## 'Five Women' is a girl's night out that all can enjoy

It would be easy — way too easy — to dismiss the Theatre UAF production of “Five Women Wearing the Same Dress” as the theatrical version of a chick flick, based on the title alone. Keep delving further into other details such as the plot and the all female cast, sans one male performer, and it’s tempting for those of us of the male variety to tell the lady friend in our lives that we’ll sit this one out in the hope that our “Glennegarry Glen Ross” is just around the corner.

Or, for that matter, “Escanaba in da Moonlight,” the overwhelming dominant male production recently done by the Fairbanks Drama Association and was the testosterone equivalency of “Five Women.” Yet, I know for certain that women attended “Escanaba,” and I know for absolute certainty that women who attended thoroughly enjoyed the play.

What I’m getting to, and had hoped to get to before the third paragraph of this review, is that the dudes out there in the Golden Heart City shouldn’t shy away from the great production that is “Five Women Wearing the Same Dress” simply because they think it will be too girly for their Carhartt-minded sensibilities. Good theater is good theater. Good dialogue is good dialogue. “Five Women” offers a lot of reasons for enjoyment that surpasses the gender of the audience.

Directed by Carrie Baker, the conductor behind other socially conscious themed plays such as “Speech and Debate” and “The Laramie Project,” “Five Dresses” is a somewhat surprising production given that it goes in directions that are not necessarily predictable. As Baker stated in her director’s notes, this is not a merely silly comedy; writer Alan Ball (writer of “American Beauty” and “Six Feet Under”) sneaks in some rather hard-hitting topics ranging from child abuse to slut shaming to sexual orientation, with some rampant profanity, drugs and rock ‘n roll thrown in just to keep the kids away. Those moments are brief but keep the play from falling into PG-13 rated sweetness and make it a more substantial evening of theater.

The play centers around five bridesmaids (clad in rather appropriately hideous dresses) on the evening of the wedding of Meredith’s (Sarah Williams) sister Tracey, and her

beau Scott. Tracey and Scott don’t make an appearance in the play, and though the night belongs to them, the play certainly doesn’t. Everything takes place in Meredith’s bedroom, a beautifully intricate and detailed set thanks to set designer Kade Mendelowitz and carpenters Mary Conflin and Freddy Gryder. Along with Meredith is the pure as the driven snow Frances (Natilly Hovda), the polar opposite bad girl Trisha (Meghan Fowler), the married but less than faithful Georgeanne (Jill Shipman) and the blunt but caring lesbian Mindy (Brandi Larson). Throughout the course of the play, the five of them interact with each other, making confessions, wisecracks and shedding tears along the way.

The dialogue is quick for the most part, and there are vast differences between each of the main performers to set them apart from each other and to allow for individual character exploration. I found all five actors equally admirable in their performances, bringing their individual characters to life in a way that was highly realistic. Williams, in particular, offers the widest range of skills leading to an emotionally charged moment close to the end of the play. I also thoroughly enjoyed the performance of Hovda, whose wide-eyed innocent astonishment of the sins unfolding around her were some of the comedic highlights of the play. Shipman is a powerhouse in her main stage theatrical debut from the first moment she walks out on the stage, displaying a great range of non-verbal as well as verbal actions that make her an enjoyment from start to finish. Larson, who was so compelling in both “Closer” and “Blithe Spirit,” is a bit more subdued in this show but still showing her talents, particularly due to the fact that she leaves stereotypes at the door in the portrayal of her character.

All that being said, my favorite moment of the play didn’t involve all five of the women wearing the same dress, it involved only one, that one being Fowler and her love interest (and sole male character) Tripp, played by Jared Olin. It was a great moment between them as they wrestled with their romantic feelings for each other, mashed up against the purely sexual feelings Fowler’s character Trisha typically experiences with the



From Theatre UAF’s production of “5 Women Wearing the Same Dress” are cast members Natilly Hovda, Meghan Fowler, Jared Olin, Jill Shipman, Sarah Williams and Brandi Larson.

Photo by Kade Mendelowitz / UAF

opposite sex. Olin’s performance was highly admirable, given his relative rookie status and that he was the one shot of testosterone in a play overflowing with estrogen. The dialogue between the two was at times touching but not without its moments of humor.

I always love going up to UAF for theatrical productions, and some of that is due to sentimental value more than anything. It was in 1988 that I performed in my first play in Fairbanks, along with fellow college freshman Andrew Cassel (sound designer for this show and a visible participant in the local theater scene) in the UAF production of the Neil Simon show “Biloxi Blues.”

So, yes, there is a place in my heart for the theater at the university and the students who vest so much time and energy along with their other college student responsibilities to bring these shows to life. It concerns me amidst the conversations taking place on the university’s budget that theater and film might not be considered a priority at some point, just as it concerns me with our current president smashing away with his budget axe to programs such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. We need the theater and arts in our lives, now more than ever, and compelling and entertaining shows such as “Five Women Wearing the Same Dress” show why that is indeed the case.

“Five Women Wearing the Same Dress” runs through this weekend with performances at 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday. For more information, visit [www.uaf.edu/TheatreFilm](http://www.uaf.edu/TheatreFilm).