

Pauline Productions & Devereux Productions, Ashfield, MA
The Cemetery Club by Ivan Menchell. Directed by Jean Koester.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“If you get lonesome, get yourself a cat and not an Italian.”

It’s The Bronx. It’s the early 1990s. Three women, Ida, Lucille, and Doris gather on a regular basis for tea at Ida’s place for tea, gossip, conversation and reminiscence. They are all widows, Jewish, attractive and each has a purpose in life. Doris wants to perpetually mourn her husband, Abe. Ida wants to move on after the death of her hubby, Murray. Lucille wants to seduce every possible living male she sees as a sort of revenge for her dead husband Harry’s infidelities. Once a month the trio travel together to a cemetery in Forest Hills to pay their “respects” to their dead spouses. Ivan Menchell’s play moves back and forth between Ida’s living room and the graveyard. In the Pauline Productions presentation, in the Ashfield Congregational Church, the setting doesn’t really matter. We know where we are. We feel where they are.



Jeannine Haas as Doris, Jaris Hanson as Lucille,
Louise Kreiger as Ida; Photo: Jean Koester

This is a comedy. There are laughs a-plenty and the ladies in the lead roles know how to milk them. Plays dealing with death can often be somber and sad, but the only sadness in this show comes from our having to leave the trio of friends behind when we leave the theater. That is a “yom tov,” a blessing the company gives us. Dressed, in Act Two, for a friend’s wedding (her latest in a series of marriages) as her bride’s maids, Jaris Hanson, Louise Kreiger and Jeannine Haas, pull out the stops (*there is an actual organ backdrop*) and get as ribald as three ladies can.

Haas plays the serious mourner in the group. She beautifully portrays a widow for life. Her sense of devotion to her spouse is touching and serious and we are moved by her genuineness. It is a stunning performance and when

she leaves the club behind her the other ladies can only speak truth about her and miss her kind presence.

She is not always kind, though. Doris and Lucille often quarrel and even come to blows. Their embattled friendship forms the basis for the comedy. Lucille buys mink at cut-rate prices and Doris always guesses the actual cost to Lucille's constant irritation. Hanson's Lucille is a silly slut whose dreams of men are often just that, dreams. She would love to follow through but we can tell that her fervor is more an illusion than a reality, a combination of comic pathos and silly ethos. Hanson plays this combination for all its values.

For all of the two women's efforts to "steal" the play, the show really belongs to Ida, played by Louise Krieger. The storyline belongs to her as she develops a new friendship with Sam, the local kosher butcher whose wife has passed away. He is charmingly played by Frank Aronson. It becomes clear, almost from his first scene, that Ida is attracted to him, and why not? Sam has an off-hand, relaxed presence that Aronson captures nicely. Krieger matches him, moment for moment. She is also a fine mediator for her female friends, a characteristic that Krieger makes work with utter simplicity and reality. When the relationship falls apart Krieger's Ida is clearly heart-broken. The actress literally becomes the character here and her work is wonderful.

Mildred, played by Julie Robbins, is a delicious character, somewhere between Lucille and Ida and her scene helps give this production a fine sense of reality.

The play has been sweetly defined by its director, Jean Koester, who seems to understand the truth behind each character. There isn't a false moment in the play. She has used the entire building as her stage which gives the audience a sense of "being there" which I found wonderful. David Knowles set works very well considering the constraints the performing space and Jim Neeley's lighting and sound design do what's needed. The Cast are credited with costumes but I'd love to know who came up with the wedding outfits!

This is a nice way to spend an evening or an afternoon. You don't have to be Jewish to get the jokes and to understand the seriousness of the piece either. You just have to be alive, alert and maybe just a little bit needy. Maybe not. It's a performance I could enjoy again.

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The Cemetery Club plays at the Ashfield Congregational Church, 492 Main Street, Ashfield, Massachusetts, through March 23. For information and tickets go to the Pauline Productions website at paulinelive.com.



Frank Aronson, Louise Krieger;
Photo: Jean Koester