

It's pretty funny Up Island

Excellent ensemble of actors but Cavendish rules

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ON STAGE

Up Island

Where: Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage,

When: To Feb. 25

Tickets: \$27-\$51 at 604-687-1644

Grade: B

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David King's new play would make a really good Canadian sitcom pilot -- think Corner Gas with Nanaimo jokes, B.C. bud and rain. Mostly think Nicola Cavendish in all her comic glory. Playing a trio of distinctive characters within an ensemble of some of Vancouver's best comic talent, Cavendish leaves you gasping at her capacity to make the ordinary extraordinarily funny.

Up island, somewhere south of Campbell River, is a small community, almost all of whose quirky middle-aged inhabitants have known each other since high school. Everyone has a history with everyone else and they're constantly in each other's pockets if not in their pants.

Unlike on American TV, the desperate housewives here are pretty well-behaved. They think a lot about sex but seem to do it only with their own husbands.

Husband Herb (Jay Brazeau) has become such a downer, constantly slagging everyone in town, that Lorraine (Suzanne Ristic) has booted him out of the house. Lorraine's uber-curler sister-in-law Lois (Patricia Drake) has her own marital problem. Her macho man Dwight (Cavendish in glorious male drag) has lost his mojo since his prostate was removed.

Old high-school sweetheart Rocky (Alex Diakun) has his eye on Lorraine, Lorraine has hers on new neighbour and local dope-dealer Vaughn (Allan Zinyk), and snooty Audrey (Cavendish again, this time in heels and gold jewelry) has the hots for Rocky.

Meanwhile, bad-tempered Herb wants back in with Lorraine. He seeks advice from his philosophical buddy George (the gigantic Wayne Nicklas) with whom he used to bully Rocky. Goofy Tory Jean -- Cavendish in her third delicious incarnation -- has a crush on George. George is gay.

Director John Cooper keeps things simple in this complicated country dance. He stages some funny sight gags behind the window of Lorraine's cedar kitchen, where much of the action

takes place, but mostly lets his actors do their thing, two or three characters per scene humourously spinning out the threads that connect them to the others.

Diakun is particularly effective as Rocky, the apparent lightweight everyone always underestimates. And Brazeau gives Herb rich comic dimension as an up-island Archie Bunker trying pathetically hard to be a more sensitive guy.

But this show belongs to Cavendish. Whether playing the broad eccentricity of Tory Jean with her thick glasses, striped leggings and childish voice, or small-town grande dame Audrey who can make the word "robust" seem hilarious, or cocksure but prostateless Dwight, whose "ah-ha, ah-ha" responses turn another character's straightforward monologue into a screamingly funny scene, she just rules. Not even terminally cute Flip the dog manages to upstage her.

Up Island starts slowly, ends somewhat limply, and isn't deep. But it's an entertaining and intelligent place, and funnier than the Saskatchewan prairie.

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