

Controversial 'Aunt Dan' makes viewers think

by Brent Hallenbeck

The main character in the Wallace Shawn play "Aunt Dan and Lemon" -- the one named for the fruit, not the one with the gender-conflicting moniker -- seems to be such a likable character at the start of the Small Potatoes Theater Company production that opened last week in Burlington. Lemon (played by Emer Pond Feeney) sits like a pixie curled up in a wingback chair, dressed in light-yellow pajamas matching her name and reminiscing about the old days with her family.

The pleasant tone changes quickly. Lemon is sickly, and she doesn't care much for her family. She has much nicer things to say about Nazi Germany.

"They were certainly successful against the Jews," Lemon says.

That lets the audience know right away that it's in for an uneasy night of theater. The new company, founded by Feeney (who's also the play's producer) and Pamela Formica (the director), barges out with a production that raises an intriguing theme -- that mankind has an innate desire to kill -- and tackles it with an intellectual ferocity to match that theme.

Lemon's disturbing world view is influenced by the woman she calls Aunt Dan (Bridget Butler), who's actually named Danielle and was a close friend of Lemon's mother (Tara Lee Downs). Lemon -- her name is a variation of her given name, Leonora -- tells of her fond encounters with Aunt Dan through flashbacks. Aunt Dan regales young Lemon with stories of her multitudinous affairs with men and women, but perhaps wields her greatest influence over the girl with her political opinions. Aunt Dan is a strident defender of former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, suggesting his bombing campaigns in Southeast Asia were necessary to foster a civil society.

"The whole purpose of government," according to Aunt Dan, "is to use force so we don't have to."

Shawn's play has drawn controversy since its 1985 premiere (including its 2004 New York revival) partly because its lead character is a Nazi sympathizer but also because his script suggests the actions of the United States in the early 1970s were not that different from the rule of the Nazis.

"It becomes absurd to talk about the Nazis as if they were unique," Lemon says. Her assimilation of Aunt Dan's complex philosophy raises a simple question -- is mankind's desire to kill, desire to dominate, in-born or learned behavior?

Tricky stuff. At Friday's production at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts, Feeney delivered her difficult lines with tremendous force -- restrained and measured force, but force nonetheless -- for such a frail and seemingly easily influenced woman. Some of Feeney's best work is wordless, when she gazes admiringly at the woman who's holding so much sway over her.

Butler was less forceful as Aunt Dan. Her character is supposed to be a beguiling Svengali, but Butler -- whose excellent past work in Burlington theater has included "Keely & Du" and Jim Lantz's "American Machine" -- tended toward rant and not enough toward persuasion. Formica displayed a largely steady directorial hand throughout the production, but "Aunt Dan and Lemon" is a veritable machine gun of words, and Formica might have done well to insert more pauses in the rampant dialogue to let it sink in.

Two of the best performances came in the secondary scenes of thoughtless, mostly sexual debauchery going on in flashbacks in Aunt Dan's life. Genevra MacPhail, as Dan's charming, predatory friend Mindy, and Ben Ash as her unfortunate prey, a slick womanizer named Raimondo, give "Aunt Dan and Lemon" its rare glimmers of humor and charm. Their scenes seem to show that the absence of compassion of humans is not restricted to the halls of government or the battlefield, but can happen in the bedroom as well.

"Aunt Dan and Lemon" is a thought-provoking if occasionally irritating work. The Small Potatoes production succeeds in the end because it does something not a lot of theater in Burlington does: It confronts.