

'Icon' a thoughtful, quietly intense piece of theater

by Brent Hallenbeck

Montgomery Clift is, in his own words early in the Seth Jarvis play "Icon," "a shadow, an echo, and absolutely all alone."

The bandages around his head and his pained movements indicate that this is soon after the Hollywood actor's near-fatal car accident, the one that history pretty much proved was fatal as far as the one-time star's career was concerned.

Sounds bleak, and it is. The script by Jarvis, the Burlington-based actor and playwright, imagines the Oscar-nominated performer having a dialogue with the audience, or with an interviewer, or with himself, or with his demons, and for the most part it ain't pretty. But Jarvis also knows theater-goers aren't going to be interested in Clift's story if it's nothing more than a self-pity-fest for nearly an hour and a half, so there's plenty of sardonic humor in the one-act play as well. The lone performer -- Jarvis' younger brother, Nathan Jarvis, who ably tackles the role of Clift -- and director Chris Caswell balance that heaviness and levity well in the production that opened Wednesday at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts.

"Icon" doesn't just tell the story of Clift, who was a huge Hollywood star before his gradual and largely self-inflicted fall from the top. It tells the story of celebrity, and how conflicting it can be to both strive for fame and be perpetually harmed by it. It could just as easily be called "I Con," as Clift acknowledges in the play that he feels most real when he's acting, not when he's trying to be whatever that person named Montgomery Clift is supposed to be.

Clift's 1956 car accident, in which he seriously damaged his bankable film-star face, leaves him seemingly wishing he had gone the way of James Dean, who was killed in a car accident a year earlier and was practically canonized in Hollywood as a result. "Who really cares about Monty Clift?" he asks, noting that the accident "didn't become tragic until they learned I survived."

Nathan Jarvis holds the audience's interest -- in fact, he commands it -- by giving vivid life force to the potentially languid decline of a once-vibrant life. He tells Clift's sad story with expressive eyes and fluid hand gestures as much as he does by his words, and by using humor as a dagger to drive the point home of just how tormented a soul he is. "Dinner time!" he half-sings in a merry tone as he pours himself a martini, which it turns out is just an appetizer for an evening of bingeing that includes painkilling pills from an analyst Clift announces he is thankful for because he is "lenient with prescriptions."

Nathan Jarvis also knows how to break down the fourth wall his brother frequently breaches in the script. "You think this is tedious for you? Imagine how I feel," he said with eyebrows arched as he talked to the audience about the time-consuming act of dialing an old rotary phone, though he seemed to be suggesting in a self-deprecating manner that his wallowing nature might be contributing to that tedium as well.

Seth Jarvis takes some liberties in his script with the truth of Clift's life. The rumors of the actor's homosexuality, for instance, are accepted as known fact in "Icon." It's as if Clift is just the vehicle for a larger story that Seth Jarvis wants to tell, one of alienation and loneliness in the bright lights and adulation of conservative Hollywood of the 1950s. The absolute facts don't matter as much in this context as the message, that celebrity and fame can be devastating, especially for someone who dreams of art above commerce and finding a warm place in what can be a cold world.

The intimate Off Center is a perfect place for a play dealing with such subject matter. There's no soundtrack and little ancillary noise in "Icon," so the theater's setting in the Old North End provides all the ambient sound that's needed. That includes distant, angry barking dogs and the roar of automobiles bleeding through the walls of the theater (which doubles as Clift's threadbare apartment). Those traffic sounds suggest so much in a play about a life that didn't end in a car crash as much as it had its painful ending confirmed.

"Icon" is a strong work by arguably the most creative sibling duo in Burlington. The story of Montgomery Clift isn't uplifting, but a thoughtful, quietly intense piece of theater is.