Metro’s Theater Underground Presents “Sylvia”

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Students at Metropolitan State University aren’t known for their deep pockets. However, quality entertainment doesn’t have to be expensive; students can see Theater Underground’s presentation of “Sylvia” for free during FallFest.

“Sylvia” is a comedy written by A.R. Gurney. The plot focuses on a pair of Manhattan empty nesters named Greg and Kate. They are new to the city, having raised their children in the suburbs. Greg finds a dog named Sylvia in a park and brings it home with him. Sylvia begins to create issues between the couple, and their marriage begins to suffer as a result. A series of comedic upturns brings all three to a newfound closeness.

Metro student Charlie Colman will be directing the production. The Metropolitan’s editor caught up with Colman to discuss the play.

**Miller: How did you get involved with Theater Underground?**

Colman: I became involved in Theater Underground before I graduated from Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC) as part of our shared theater program. I knew several past members, and being part of a student-run theater company was a major attraction. Metro has been very supportive of us, and as a result, we're able to put on several quality shows every season. I have been an officer at Theater Underground for my entire college career, and the experience I have gained has been invaluable to me.

**Miller: Have you directed other plays, or is this your first?**

Colman: Sylvia will be my directorial debut. I have worked in nearly every other capacity in previous shows with MCTC/Theater Underground, from acting to set building and board operations, but directing is something that needs to be built up to. A director is responsible for every aspect of a show, from lighting and set, to how an actor moves onstage. I wanted to challenge myself to complete this degree, and I decided that the best way to demonstrate to myself, faculty and peers that I was capable of becoming a professional was to take the reins of a full production. Gail Smogard, the program advisor, and Scott Rubsam have been very supportive of me and pushed me to do the best I could.

**Miller: How many people are involved in the production of Sylvia?**

Colman: It's a fairly small cast. We have six people in the cast: Metro State students Kurt Rooney and Mark Stewart will be playing Greg and Tom, alumni Pepper Branstner is in the role of Kate,Heather Raiter as Leslie, and we are all extremely fortunate to have professional actor Drue Malcolm filling out the role of Sylvia. I have brought in a professional theater electrician Jeremy Ellarby to design the lighting, and longtime theater professional Kirby Moore will be my set builder. Kyle Anderson, another Metro student, will be front of house and stagehand.

I am delighted to be able to have such a wonderful mix of people from all over the Twin Cities come help me bring this show to Metro State.

**Miller: Without giving away too many spoilers, do you have a favorite scene?**

Colman: Well ... that's a very difficult question to answer. Every scene has a different “flavor”, if you will. The comedy is definitely on the forefront in most scenes, but the drama has brought tears to the eyes of myself and cast more than once. But I believe my favorite has to be at the end of first act, with Kate and Sylvia squaring off on all fours and Greg dropping in, completely unaware of the situation unfolding in his living room.

**Miller: How or why was this play selected for production?**

Colman: I was stuck on selecting a script for this project for quite a while. A good friend of mine introduced me to “Sylvia,” and it was a no-brainer from there. It stresses simplicity in set and technical aspects, and focuses on the characters. It's very surreal, but at the same time familiar to a wide audience. The themes are universal, and a broad spectrum of people will find great enjoyment, and even a bit of food for thought as they watch the story unfold. Challenging, yet simple.

**Miller: I understand that in this play, one character is a dog played by a human. Is that correct? Can you talk a little about the dynamics of asking an actor to play an animal? How does that affect the narrative?**

Colman: That is absolutely correct. Drue Malcolm is in the role of Sylvia, and she fits it wonderfully. As most dog owners will tell you, dogs have very distinct personalities from one another, just like us humans. We describe them and their actions using human terms and emotions: smiling, sad, excited … they're not terribly different from us in that aspect. An actor has to know how to portray all these emotions, and viewing them from the perspective of a dog is a very challenging part of this script. Drue is doing an exemplary job of it. However, do not expect someone in a dog costume (this has been asked of me far more than once already). The physicality is what gives her “dogness.” Movements, tempo and facial expressions are what key people into her particular narrative in this show, as opposed to the lines she has.

**Miller: Do you have anything else you would like to tell students about Sylvia?**

Colman: You will enjoy yourself. This is a beautiful, simple and heartwarming script that is watchable and entertaining. At the same time, it has a lot to say about how we feel about each other as human beings, and how much we hide from each other. As simple as the script seems on the surface, the cast and I are discovering new ideas and themes every day of rehearsal. Simplicity often belies depth, but you're not being hit over the head with it. The trip to Minneapolis is a long one, yes, but it will be entirely worth it. That, I can promise you. Also, it will be free of charge, although we will be taking non-perishable food donations for students in need.

There are four showings of Sylvia: Thursday, September 10 at 7 p.m., Friday, September 11 at 7 p.m., Saturday, September 12 at 2 p.m., and Saturday, September 12 at 7 p.m. All showings are at the Stagedoor Theater in the Whitney Fine Arts Center on the MCTC Campus in Minneapolis.

Photos, Captions, and Credit

Photo file one: Sylvia 1

Caption: Drue Malcom (left) and Kurt Rooney (right) practicing their roles as Sylvia and Greg.

Photo credit: Kevin Miller

Photo file two: Sylvia 2

Caption: Malcom (left) rehearsing as Sylvia, who has just spotted a cat. Rooney (right), playing Greg, looks on.

Photo credit: Kevin Miller