

Wednesday, March 30, 2011

## Williamston's 'Bowling' is a solid hit

Sterling stars make 1950s comedy-drama connect

by Paul Wozniak



Pithy bowling metaphors scarcely describe the Williamston Theatre's "While We Were Bowling."

Carter W. Lewis' magnificent script takes a curved look at one suburban family in 1957, contrasting the televised ideal to the reality on stage with a poignant and tender gaze. Director John Lepard expands his record of pulling strong performances from Michigan State University actors and astounding performances from established veterans. The result is a polished production that smoothly glides from tragic lows to comic highs with a slight spin sure to knock down every demographic pin.

Bowling is practically a religion for the McGlauphlins, an Irish-Catholic nuclear family prepped for a potential Commie invasion. Though not allowed to say "God" in a bowling alley, the teenage son and daughter speak fluent Russian, thanks to their protective yet "cursed" father. Unable to break his late father's bowling league record, the play's patriarch, Melvin (Joseph Albright), doubles down by passing on his own scrupulous orthodoxy to his pious son, Brent (Tyler VanCamp). Meanwhile, his daughter, Lydia (Kelly Studnicki), discovers how to score with the local roughneck pin boy, while his distant wife, Frances (Suzi Regan), self-medicates in the typical 1950s fashion. When a 12-year-old African-American boy delivers the family's first TV set — and stays around — revealed secrets and physical calamities break apart the family's idyllic veneer, leaving them to navigate through stringent social mores with faith and resiliency.

The play is really about Frances, and Regan's performance is as nuanced and beautiful as the Norman Rockwell painting her character appears to be based on.

She maneuvers through her character's slow transition from repressed to reborn with intense yet natural calculation. Regan conveys all of her character's love for her children, frustration with her husband and defiance of her community with burning eyes and crafty smiles that are never overplayed and always spellbinding.

Albright plays the lackluster Melvin and Melvin's brother, John, with dry conviction. As Melvin, Albright's dumbstruck facial responses to family revelations are priceless. As the disapproving John, Albright sums up the community's critical gaze with his own, providing the perfect foe for the family to overcome.

Ayo Obayan plays 12-year-old Jeremy with the crucial blend of innocence, curiosity and awareness. Studnicki and VanCamp as Brent not only speak seemingly flawless Russian, but also share the incredibly combative yet understanding chemistry of a brother and sister. Russian may be the character's secret language, but Studnicki and VanCamp translate with their subtle physicality. As Lydia's greaser boyfriend, Stickpin, Edward O'Ryan channels his inner suave, slyly charming the ladies onstage as well as in the audience.

Kirk Domer's scenic design seamlessly morphs from bowling-themed living room to actual bowling alley with minimal movement. Soundboard operator Alex Gay completes the bowling illusion with perfectly timed effects.

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### **'While We Were Bowling'**

Williamston Theatre 122 S. Putnam Road, Williamston Through April 17 8 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays; added matinees at 3 p.m. March 26, March 31, April 9 and April 16 \$24 Friday and Saturday evenings; \$20 Saturday matinees and Sundays; \$18 Thursdays (517) 655-7469