

*Nashville Scene*, May 11, 2006

by Martin Brady

## Rep gits-r-done

Since 1991, David Bottrell and Jessie Jones' *Dearly Departed* has been performed all over the country, achieving status as a minor genre classic. Despite its Bible Belt setting and obvious intent to lampoon the ways of trailer-park folks, it still features witty, reasonably good writing, even if its aesthetic is more Larry the Cable Guy than Noel Coward.

For Tennessee Repertory Theatre's final production of the season, director David Alford has assembled a first-rate cast to tell the slight tale of the Turpin family, forced to gather together when Daddy Bud dies suddenly from a stroke. There's not much plot, but the portraits of big-haired, blue-collar brothers, sisters, cousins, in-laws and friends are funny enough to justify filling out 17 scenes over two acts. Plus, comedy aside, there's something heartwarming about the way these characters embody the usually inexplicable dynamics of family loyalty and have faith in the power of the well-worn, well-intentioned cliché.

The ensemble of 10 is strong everywhere, but special kudos go to Sam Whited, Martha Wilkinson, Rep newcomer Michael Abbott Jr., and Jan Dial, who pretty much steals the show snapping photos of the deceased in his coffin. Jenny Littleton and Bobby Wyckoff together perform five diverse extra-family roles, displaying admirable versatility and unerring comic timing. Their joint portrayal of a doddering old man and his caretaker wife is one of the funniest local stage renderings in recent years.

*Nashville City Paper*, May 10, 2006

## Tennessee Rep closes season with 'Dearly Departed'

By Amy Stumpfl, [astumpfl@nashvillecitypaper.com](mailto:astumpfl@nashvillecitypaper.com)

Have you ever had dinner with a friend where you managed to have a perfectly enjoyable evening, despite a mediocre meal? That's how I feel about Tennessee Repertory Theatre's production of *Dearly Departed* — there isn't much substance to this southern-fried comedy, but thanks to the efforts of an all-star cast and crew, I still had a lovely time.

What: *Dearly Departed*

When: Through May 20. Performances begin at 6:30 p.m. on Thursdays; 7:30 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays, with a 2:30 p.m. matinee on Saturday, May 20

Where: The Polk Theater at TPAC, 505 Deaderick St.

Cost: \$10-\$40

Info: 255-ARTS (2787); [ticketmaster.com](http://ticketmaster.com) or [tennesseerep.org](http://tennesseerep.org)

Don't get me wrong, I'm not so politically correct that I can't appreciate *Dearly Departed's* redneck brand of humor. It's just that it's been done so many times before. Popular comedians such as Larry the Cable Guy and Jeff Foxworthy, and theatrical productions like *Greater Tuna* and *Toe Roaster* all offer a decidedly blue-collar approach to comedy that seems to register with most of us.

The same goes for *Dearly Departed*.

Built on familiar small-town stereotypes, the show opens with the unexpected passing of Daddy Bud Turpin, head of what has to be one of the most dysfunctional families around. The remaining Turpins gather to plan a proper Southern funeral — if only they could keep their own problems from keep getting in the way.

From family feuds and financial woes to infertility and infidelity, the Turpins have seen it all. The problem is that we have too. And in the hands of a lesser ensemble, the jokes could get pretty tired. But director David Alford has assembled an exceptional cast — including Michael Abbott Jr., Rachel Agee, Brandon Boyd, Rona Carter, Jan Dial, Misty Lewis, Jenny Littleton, Sam Whited, Martha Wilkinson and Bobby Wyckoff — that makes you laugh in spite of yourself.

The entire ensemble is strong. However, a few standouts deserve special mention. Dial and Abbott are hilarious as Marguerite (Daddy Bud's Bible-thumping sister) and Royce (her shiftless son). Their constant jabbing and banter keeps the audience rolling. Littleton and Wyckoff also are terrific in multiple supporting roles, including former Yam Queen Juanita and the oh-so-put-upon Rev. Hooker. But it is their take on the elderly Veda and Norval that nearly steals the show.

Despite some lame attempts at philosophy, *Dearly Departed* does best when it sticks to redneck caricatures and homespun humor. It may not be a five-star meal, but like your favorite meat-and-three, *Dearly Departed* is sure to satisfy.

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*The Tennessean*

## **Cast transforms predictable play into fun**

By Evans Donnell

There are other plays that better explore the world of quirky Southerners than “Dearly Departed.” For greater depth, there’s “Crimes of the Heart” or “Steel Magnolias.” “Greater Tuna” is funnier.

But Tennessee Repertory Theatre employs fine actors in its revival of the 1991 David Bottrell-Jessie Jones comedy. And despite a set that threatens to overwhelm them, those actors inspire some hearty, and frequent, laughter.

The Turpin family has just lost its patriarch Bud. His wife Raynelle (Rona Carter) is hardly the grieving widow, describing her late spouse as mean and surly. And eldest son Ray-Bud (Sam Whited) feels the weight of the world on his shoulders as he deals with the funeral arrangements and an eccentric collection of family members and townspeople.

Sounds like a funny set-up, right? Well, there are laughs, though Bottrell and Jones’ two-hour story is like a rambling “Mama’s Family” TV episode. But it’s not the vignette-strewn script (which digresses into scenes that send up small-town religious radio programs, old people’s health problems and women who name their children after celebrities) but some of Nashville’s best performers that inspire laughter.

Whited, who recently gave a terrific performance as Toad in Nashville Children's Theatre's production of "The Wind in the Willows," really shines as Ray-Bud. His deadpan delivery of the line, "Yeah, I just laugh myself to sleep every night" is a laugh-until-you-cry moment. His physicality believably crafts a character who's been worn down by life but still has some fire in his soul.

Carter is touching as Raynelle. She, Whited and Martha Wilkinson as Ray-Bud's loving wife Lucille play very realistic characters who offer relief from the Southern-redneck stereotypes Bottrell and Jones have presented in other roles.

Thankfully, Carter, Whited and Wilkinson's talented colleagues manage to make those otherwise predictable characters funny too. Of special note are Jan Dial as the Bible-thumping Marguerite and Michael Abbott Jr. as her wisecracking wastrel son, Royce.

Rachel Agee is marvelous as Delightful, Ray-Bud's always-eating and ironically-named sister. Add some sterling support from veteran performers Brandon Boyd, Misty Lewis, Jenny Littleton and Bobby Wyckoff, and this show has a cast that hits on all comic acting cylinders.

Scenic designer Gary C. Hoff and costumer Trish Clark have developed a color-coded set and costumes for "Dearly Departed." It's an impressive look, but the large silhouette portraits of the show's characters that dominate Polk Theater's playing space threaten to overwhelm the action. The balance between artistic and technical elements in any show is a delicate one, and Hoff's set is too much of a good thing to keep those elements balanced.

Still, it's the actors that matter most here. "Dearly Departed" produces laughs because its cast has the ability to make a wandering and often predictable play seem more focused and fresh. •