

Go North, young man (and woman), to Ambler theater

William Donnelly's *Magnetic North* manages to make the familiar seem new. His short 75-minute play takes a strained marriage and makes what could be banal seem, if not profound, at least fresh.

James and Leigh's marriage was almost ideal until Leigh (Sarah Shahinian) miscarried a late-term



pregnancy. They were both shattered, but James was able to recover and Leigh was not. Several months later she's still a mess. Coincidentally, James (Brad Heikes) meets up with an old girl friend, Mara (Christie Parker). They talk about old times; some flames are rekindled, and James

James (background, played by Brad Heikes) comes home late in the evening to find his friend, Emmett (Paul Felder), embracing his wife, Leigh (Sarah Shahinian), in Act II Playhouse's production of *Magnetic North*. This regional premiere is on stage now through Nov. 16.

feels guilty.

Watching all this is James' co-worker Emmett, (Paul Felder), a delightfully realistic fellow who values relationships that go no further than the bedroom, or so he

says. For all his male piggishness, however, Emmett has a wisdom about life that shows he really does value women as something more than sex objects.

There isn't a whole lot new in *Magnetic North*, but Donnelly's writing and Frank Martin's Act II Playhouse production, which runs through Nov. 16, make the play an entertaining and even moving evening.

The cast is superb. Christie Parker captures Mara's loneliness and the allure she had (some of which she still has) for James. Brad Heikes still adores his wife but can't figure out how to make her feel better about her loss. He also manifests, in a most believable way, the guilt he feels about the hormonal rush and the curiosity about "what might have been" with Mara. Sarah Shahinian is first-rate as the sad and anxious Leigh.

It is Paul Felder's Emmett who steals the evening. The combination of male pig and wise friend springs forth so naturally, and with so much humor and humanity, that his character is almost irresistible.

Dirk Durossette's attractive set converts the tiny Act II stage into three distinct locations for the play's eight short scenes. The other good designers are Wade Laboissonniere (costumes), James Leitner (lighting) and Mark Valenzuela (sound).

All in all, *Magnetic North* is a fine study of the difficulties of maintaining relationships under less than ideal circumstances. Like its characters, it is both human and appealing.

For tickets to *Magnetic North*, playing at Ambler's Act II Playhouse through Nov. 16, call 215-654-0200 or visit www.act2.org.

Curtain Call

by Clark Groome

cgroome@comcast.net



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**Rich
McIlhenney**

215-641-2500 (office)

215-275-6303 (cell)

RMAC88@AOL.COM