

Tuesday, May 06, 2008

Writtle Cards' When the Reaper Calls

WHEN THE REAPER CALLS, Writtle Cards, April 17, 2008

Director Laura Bennett

Reviewer Stewart Adkins

Described as a Comedy Thriller and appropriate for a small cast on a small stage I was not entirely convinced by the comedic description of When the Reaper Calls. Although there were some funny lines and amusing vignettes they rarely carried through the entire play and much of the set up during the initial scenes was dependent on at least a passing knowledge of comparative philosophy. "Intrigue" would have been a better description than "Thriller" since the plot clearly thickened when we discovered that Victor had apparently come to life again (despite having been shot and was being judged by the Grim Reaper as to his worthiness for heaven or hell) but there were very few sub-plots that remained unresolved for any period of time. This left the audience, or at least one member of it, scratching their collective heads about where this self-indulgent dialogue was actually heading. This is a completely different feeling to being kept in suspense. This may be an unfair conclusion but I was so put off by the underlying premise of the play (that one academic should goad another one to shoot him in order to prove that even Stoics can give in to base instincts) that I found it difficult to be objective about the production itself. Suffice to say it didn't quite gel for me even though I couldn't put my finger on why. Perhaps Harlan's dialogue was a little rushed and Victor's manner slightly too earnest and insufficiently teasing to aid early comprehension of what was happening. It was clear from the dialogue that Victor wanted to shake Harlan out of his Stoic lethargy but it was not clear why he seemed to find it necessary to go to such ridiculously extreme lengths to do so. This puzzlement never left me even after the denouement, which was a neat switch that revealed that it was Victor who was the true victim of his friend's conspiracy rather than the other way around. At no time did I suspect that reversal but I think I should have had some pre-warning from subtle looks, glances, raised eyebrows and shared guilt of the conspiratorial characters in the build up to that finale. It may have been the nerves of a first night or it may have been my lack of objectivity but I found When the Reaper Calls to be less entertaining than I had hoped. Apart from the minor comments above each of the characters was entirely believable on their own but less so as a team. Directorially the production was strong, with exits and entrances appropriate, no masking, good timing on the observations through the window upstage and well ordered chases, fights and "murder". I suspect that another run-through would have helped this production enormously but with the dialogue and structure of the play set in stone Writtle Cards had little to work with.