2008 Second Place Great Works Analysis

A Chimney, Keystone, Kiss, and Communication

Historical Context

_Roofsliding_ is a play written by BYU student Morag Plaice Shepherd (“Playwriting”). It was first written as a 10-minute play entitled _Cake_, then revised to become _Playing Fields_, and finally given the title _Roofsliding_ (“Playwriting”). This final title comes from an activity for males fourteen or older, which consists of participants silently sliding down a rooftop, often at an angle of approximately 80%, until coming to an abrupt stop after placing their feet in the gutter (“Roofsliding”). Next, still silently, the players climb back up the roof where they can finally talk amongst themselves (“Roofsliding”). Up to 32 men participate at the same time in this activity, which is not actually a race to the roof’s end, as might be imagined (“Roofsliding”). Instead, the only way to lose the game is apparently by falling off of the roof, an accident that may lead to death, as the sport usually takes place on top of a three-story building (“Roofsliding”). A boy often stands on the ground below the players to warn innocent passers-by of the potential danger of debris falling from the roof as the men slide down (“Roofsliding”).

Analysis

_Roofsliding_ uses a variety of techniques, including the production’s set and seemingly insignificant details, to encourage audience members to think about interpersonal relationships. The play’s set reveals a key element of the character’s relationships. As the audience looks on stage, it sees the three main rooms in which the characters interact, each room with a chimney rising above it. The chimney’s start out as normal columns of bricks, the pieces laid and secured carefully in their places. However, as each chimney rises, the bricks are no longer well organized and securely built. Instead, the bricks get further from each other in a messy scattering that looks as though it could fall at any moment. These chimneys, rising above each of the three important households, symbolize the relationships of the individuals within the homes: Mum and Alex; Janice and Cirks; and Rachael and James. The relationships were all steady and stable
at one time, like the bricks on the bottom of the fireplace, but have somehow, over time, loosened, and are now balancing precariously on the base of their formerly strong relationships. We sense that Mum and Alex likely got along much better before Alex’s father left them, Janice and Cirk were clearly content with each other not long ago, and Rachael and James had been in love when they were married. Overtime, however, they were careless with their relationships which, before they knew it, had deteriorated to the point of almost toppling over. Indeed, throughout the play it looks as if Alex will leave her mother, Janice will leave Cirk, and Rachael will leave James. However, despite the disarray of the chimneys, they have not quite come apart. Like these chimneys, the relationships have not yet fallen, and the characters realize the danger while they still have the chance to improve the situation.

Another piece of the set further symbolizes this same disintegration. The archway to Rachael and James’s living room is made of brick, like the chimney. Several pieces are beginning to come out of place, including the ever-important keystone. If a keystone is completely pulled from its place in an arch, the archway, and perhaps the entire house, will fall. If we allow the archway to represent, like the chimneys, the rocky interpersonal relationships, we find that the keystone can represent communication. None of the characters appropriately communicates during the play, because they are all unwilling to listen and/or to fully express their opinions. Without this important element of solid relationships, these relationships look as if they will fall, bringing the characters’ entire lives down around their feet, just as the archway looks likely to fall and bring the whole house down with it.

One interesting detail that subtly reveals the relationship between James and Rachael and their missing communication is the play’s use of kissing. Both characters try to kiss their spouse goodbye when he or she is too angry or distracted to receive the sign of affection. James completely misses the fact that his wife tries to kiss him because he is so caught up in watching a game. When he sees that she has left without a kiss, he calls after her, and she, unwilling to try again, sighs in exasperation and leaves. In order for communication to work properly, one clearly must be willing to turn off the television and disregard any other distractions. And, because no one is perfect, one must often be willing to again try to express his or her feelings when another has not properly listened the first time. Throughout the play, the audience observes the characters failing to use these concepts in communication. James is often too distracted by his own interests to hear what Rachael has to say, while Rachael is sometimes unwilling to try to explain herself again when James is actually listening. When they finally sit on the couch, side-by-side, at the play’s end, James leans over to give his wife a loving kiss on the cheek. This kiss represents James unselfish desire to communicate his love, and Rachael’s unflinching
acceptance shows her willingness to receive this communication. This simple gesture shows the couple trying to push the keystone of communication back into its proper place before it is too late.

Personal Response

Although I enjoyed Roofsliding, and am usually a fan of happy endings, I felt that the play ended a bit too abruptly, without proper resolution to the many problems and arguments that were evident throughout the performance. However, the more I’ve thought about it, the more I appreciate this rather quick conclusion, because I realize that the production was not attempting to bring all loose ends together, but was showing that the relationships can be mended with future work. For example, in deciding to stay home because her mother and grandmother need her, Alex has not solved the many communication barriers that exist between the three of them, but has made the first step towards doing so. Rachael and James also act unselfishly towards each other in the play’s closing minutes, but many elements of their relationship will obviously require further effort. They too have taken only the first step in making their home a happier place, but by unselfishly demonstrating their care for one another have shown that they are indeed willing to try, and that their case is not so hopeless as it before appeared to be.

The one conclusion that remains a bit abrupt is that of Janice and Cirk. They seem perfectly content by the play’s conclusion, and even plan on marriage. One thing that makes this almost perfect ending a bit easier for me to accept, however, is that this couple seems to have learned what the other characters must still work to discover about communication. To me, the improvement is shown when Janice admits to Cirk that she has never liked grapes. Because I considered communication to be one of the major motifs of the performance, the fact that they understood it better than the others made Janice and Cirk’s abrupt and happy ending more acceptable for me.
Works Cited

“Roofsliding.” Roofsliding. Brigham Young University Department of Theatre and Media Arts, 2008.

“Playwriting at BYU.” Roofsliding. Brigham Young University Department of Theatre and Media Arts, 2008.