PLAY REVIEW

Taking ‘Crimes’ to heart amid the laughs

BY JAMES F. COTTER

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NEW PALTZ — “Crimes of the Heart” by Beth Henley opened on Broadway in 1981 and was an instant hit, winning the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and it has remained a Southern Gothic classic.

The story of three sisters, Lenny, Babe and Meg MaGrath of Hazlehurst, Miss., it blends comedy into its tragedy, for in this parental home a mother has hanged herself, a grandfather is sick and dying, and each of the sisters suffers a dysfunctional life. Lenny, on her 30th birthday, stays at home to care for grandfather and looks to become an unhappy spinster; Babe has just shot her abusive husband in the stomach and is out on bail; and Meg has failed in her dream of Hollywood success as a singer, recovering from a breakdown and numerous reckless affairs. What Henley manages is that the worse things get, the more comical they become.

The department of theatre arts at SUNY New Paltz is staging a lively revival of “Crimes” under the direction of Connie Rotunda at the Parker Theatre. The actors handle the Dixie drawl with fluency and interact with natural urgency.

Henley’s dialogue is quirky and unpredictable, and the actors move it with sufficient attention, although the subtle timing sometimes misses a beat. Laughter is at its best when it is timed to be unexpected.

As Lenny, Brittany Martel sets the right tone from the start by being sad, lonely and hopeless. Told that her horse has been struck by lightning, we know that things can only get worse. She shows herself caring and concerned for her sisters, whose lives are more mixed up than hers.

Martel grows with the part and by Act 3 proves herself a healer and helper. As Babe, Jamie Kracht is the catalyst for the others by playing the innocent victim in an attempted murder, vivacious and upbeat in a dire dilemma. On the other hand, Emma Larsen embodies the prodigal Meg as the self-centered spoiled sibling who will have her own way until she, too, realizes she is deeply bonded to her family.

The three play off one another so well that by the final act they are at their funniest around the kitchen table after a series of disasters.

Jessica Contino plays Chick Boyle, a cousin who enjoys being the bearer of bad news. Lenny finally gives her her comeuppance at the end. Rob Gagnon is Barnette Lloyd, a lawyer who comes to aid Babe and is obviously attracted to her. He has an old vendetta against her husband for ruining his father.

Another visitor, Doc Porter, a former old flame of Meg’s who rekindles their passion although he is now married, is portrayed by Marco DaSilva as a man easily led into seduction.

Ken Goldstein’s set design for the kitchen and hall to the upstairs frames the action in a clean, welllighted place, and Jena Goldberg’s costumes reflect the taste and fashion of the period in the South.