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All is Not Gold

John Hofland

Dordt College

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Incidentally

by James Koldenhoven

All is Not Gold

Since one of the goals of the Theatre Arts Department is to encourage the development of Christian playwrights, it annually produces a new script written by a Christian. The new script chosen for this year's production was Barry Crush's play, *Vardley's Lives*.

Crush, a Dordt alumnus, began working on the script while he was a student at Dordt. Two years ago, the theatre department produced an early version of the script, and having noted weaknesses in it, suggested that Crush rewrite the play. Along with the suggestion came a promise: if he revised the script, following recommendations he received after the early production, Dordt would produce the new version.

The rewritten script has incorporated a number of interesting ideas. First of all, the characters of the play come from two worlds, the world of fantasy and the world of reality, and they manage to go from one world to the other. Richard Vardley, a major character, is an unpublished cartoonist, but not far into the play, two of his cartoon characters come alive. The event serves as an interesting symbol for a problem facing any artist: where does reality end and fantasy begin.

Later on, Lester, one of the cartoon characters who has come to life, leaves his cartoon box and enters Vardley's home, rebelling at the control Vardley has had over him. Again, Crush has begun to grapple with an interesting issue, the relationship of

creature to creator. Crush himself has noted that he intended to use the creature-creator relationship to point to the relationship between God and His creation.

Unfortunately, the script deals insufficiently with the issues it raises, and the action of the play centers primarily on the relationship between Vardley and his cartoon character. Vardley and his wife fight; Vardley's neighbors, a married couple, fight; and even his cartoon characters, a male and female of undefined relationship, fight constantly. The sad result is that since the play begins and ends with portrayals of fighting couples, and since it offers them no option but to fight, we are left with the impression that the world is hopelessly caught up in unhappy, unresolvable relationships.

Overshadowed by these bickering couples, the creature-creator relationship does not receive the attention it needs. The intended symbol never becomes apparent, and if it does, it makes confusing statements about the relationship of God to His creation.

In spite of these inadequacies, however, the script was produced a second time. As noted earlier, the department does want to encourage young playwrights, and it wanted to encourage Crush. He had rewritten the script under loose departmental supervision (a relationship necessitated by his distance from Dordt—he now lives in Pennsylvania), and he needed to see the second draft produced in order to discover its strengths and

weaknesses.

Crush came to see the production, and was able to hear the comments both of audiences and of those who worked on the production. Having had such interaction, he seemed eager to take another look at his script. As we in the department had hoped, therefore, the production should have served to help him refine his writing.

It was not only Crush who benefited, however. We in the Theatre Arts Department had to stretch ourselves as we dealt with the script. For example, in order to bring to life the two-dimensional characters that Crush had created, the cast chose a broad, clown-like acting style, and learning such a style is always helpful to young actors. It frees them from dull patterns, and as one actress noted, the style can help an actor separate himself from the role that he plays.

The script was equally challenging for designers. Shirley Matheis, the costume designer for *Vardley's Lives*, created costumes out of cloth-faced polyfoam in

order to give the characters a cartoon-like two-dimensionality. Mike Stair's set, likewise, suggested two-dimensionality, and encouraged the actors to exploit the acting style they had chosen.

Therefore, although the final production was in many ways disappointing, it was still a worthwhile exercise. Many people found the play entertaining, and it certainly provided those of us working on the production with a great deal of education and opportunity for artistic stretching.

More important, however, is that the production served to remind us that even though we work together as Christian artists, we still are subject to failure when we attempt to communicate our Christianity through our art. This may be a rather disconcerting observation, but it is one that will require the department to ask some difficult questions now that it has produced *Vardley's Lives*.

John Hofland