

PLAYWRITES

On Golden Pond

Gainesville Community Playhouse

This funny and bittersweet story deals with an old couple spending their 48th, and possibly their last, summer on Golden Pond. It deals with growing old and growing up in a humorous and comforting way.

Norman is an "old poop," as Ethel calls him. He's a crotchety and sharp-tongued man, even more so because his mind and body are giving out on him. He's so afraid of death that he tries to mask his fear by talking about it constantly. "I think I'll read a book. Hope I can finish it before I'm finished. Better get a *Reader's Digest* condensed version."

His wife, Ethel, is in much better shape, both physically and mentally. Their quiet summer is interrupted by a visit from their daughter, Chelsea.

We soon learn that Norman and Chelsea don't get along. Apparently, Norman always wanted a boy. And though Chelsea tried to please him, they have never been close. This is her first visit in years.

With Chelsea comes Bill Ray, her new boyfriend, and his son, Billy, from a previous marriage. They are going off to Europe, and Norman and Ethel agree to look after Billy for them.

Over the course of the summer, Billy becomes a substitute for Chelsea. Norman teaches him to fish and they become great friends. He even occasionally calls Billy "Chelsea" by accident. Slowly, Norman learns to be a better father.

Meanwhile Chelsea returns, having married Bill in Brussels. She grapples with her feelings of pain and her wish for a rapprochement. After Ethel urges her on, she finally talks to him.

"I just want to be your friend," she says. "Means you'll have to come

around more often," he answers. "Fine," she says, smiling.

Still, the centerpiece of the play is the relationship between Norman and Ethel, and those are the scenes that work best.

But, though Norman is a very funny character, Ralph Selfridge portrays him as more crafty than defensive, taking the edge off the pathos in the story. Also, his accent sounds somewhat British, though it does rise at the end of sentences as it should. This is rather disconcerting and puts the play slightly off kilter.

Much better is Phyllis Dilgren as Ethel. She's the right mixture of perky and old, and is rather amusing as she tramps about the stage singing an old campfire song.

Charlie the mailman, Chelsea's old flame, is played rather boorishly by Steve Detweiller. It's easy to see why she didn't marry him. Heath Ward and Kevin Bodge are fine as the two Bills, and Vicki Pennington *tries* to put some passion

and life into Chelsea.

But overall, the play lacks punch. It's mildly funny when it should be *very* funny. More importantly, the emotional scenes aren't very convincing. We can hear Chelsea's pain and bitterness, but we don't feel it. We know Norman's health is failing, but he seems too quick on the draw with one-liners, too brave to let us fear death with him.

A major problem is the direction. All of the actors basically stand still when they're not talking. Chelsea actually seems to freeze into place between her lines. This further drains the inherent drama of the story.

Still, despite its problems, *On Golden Pond* is a friendly story about fears we all share. Maybe Ethel said it best when she was talking about death. "Kind of comforting. Not such a bad place to go really."

By Michael Giltz