

"Fully Committed" brings Christmas to July

By Jack Felix, Sun-Gazette Correspondent



It's Christmas in July as the Millbrook Playhouse presents "Fully Committed" with remaining performances today at 2 and 7:30 p.m. in the downstairs Cabaret. An elf who sings - rather than announces - the pre-show announcements looks suspiciously like Artistic Director Mary Kate Burke.

The play is set just a few weeks before Christmas in the basement of an upscale hotel, where one harried employee mans the phones as would-be customers beg, threaten and cajole him for dinner reservations (The meager decorations and lights in Sam's office look to have been recycled from last winter's fundraiser "The Santaland Diaries"). The one-act play runs nearly an hour and a half and opens as Sam enters the office. No sooner than after Sam hangs up his coat and scarf, the phone starts ringing, the intercom starts buzzing and the chef's hotline flashes for his undivided attention.

An aspiring actor from Indiana, Sam works at an unnamed Upper East Side New York hotel, where he is urged not to tell callers that the dining room is really booked but simply that it is "Fully Committed." There are nearly 40 characters listed in the program but only a single actor plays not only Sam but also all the kooks, egotists, would-be celebrities and others incessantly calling him for a reservation.

Millbrook presented "Fully Committed" in 2002 with Jerry Deal playing Sam. Deal was memorable and so is the 2010 Sam, played by Tim Dietrich. **Not only is Dietrich a funnyman, as he covered last summer with Millbrook's hilarious hit "The Nerd," but versatile in creating funny accents and facial expressions to portray the callers** who include a sheik's right-hand man, the famed restaurant reviewer Zagat, a guy with laryngitis, a secretary with depression, Dr. Ruth Westheimer and a thug who wants someone to sing "The Lady Is A Tramp" for his parents' anniversary.

Two on the hotel's staff call frequently: Jean-Claude, the Maitre D', who is less interested in getting the names down on a list than in snuffing drugs up his nose; and the meglomaniacal chef, who sounds a bit like Gordon Ramsay from television's "Hell's Kitchen." With barely a semblance of a plot, "Fully Committed" has Sam fretting over getting a callback for a role in an upcoming play at the Lincoln Center and trying to get time off at Christmas to visit his recently widowed father in South Bend.

Dietrich's bio lists Sam as one of his favorite roles, having previously performed this one-man show at Los Angeles' The Actor's Playhouse. Furiously carrying on both ends of the conversations, **Dietrich seamlessly switches characters each time the telephone rings or the intercom buzzes. Closing your eyes for a few moments and listening to the rapid-fire changes in voices and accents will cause a greater appreciation of Dietrich's mastery of the role.**

Sam valiantly tries to react to the threats, bribes and tantrums in a low-key manner - except when uttering a few choice expletives - until he is ordered to mop up a mess in the ladies' restroom. This low point of the day soon makes him realize that he does wield power when he plugs in a reservation for a society matron, who will be bringing the Lincoln Center producer with her. Putting on his coat and scarf, Sam, without asking off, telephones his dad to tell him that he will be coming home for Christmas. **The intermissionless show is directed by Michael Chamberlin with a clever light show - designed by Dan Jobbins as a jazzed up rendition of "Jingles Bells."**

With this past Thursday's opening of its fourth show, "Triumph of Love," Millbrook Playhouse is already reaching the halfway point of its 2010 season. From this summer's first three productions, it's apparent that Millbrook is 'fully committed' to offering fine live theatrical entertainment for Centre, Clinton and Lycoming Counties.

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