

33 Variations at Theatre 3 links a dying scholar's quest to Beethoven's gorgeous music

Review by Martha Heimberg

Theatre Three's production of Moises Kaufman's *33 Variations* feels wonderfully like an evening at the concert hall, as well as the theater.

Jac Alder directs the drama about a music professor dying of Lou Gehrig's disease who is driven to spend the rapidly approaching end of her life figuring out why Beethoven spent his late years writing the 33 "Diabelli" variations, a daring piano work based on an apparently ordinary waltz written by his Viennese music publisher.

Throughout the play, as the ailing musicologist travels to Bonn, Germany to investigate manuscripts at the Beethoven House, the master's gorgeous music issues forth from on a baby grand placed high on the three-platform set. Clark Griffith, a winner of the 2007 Van Cliburn International Competition, plays exquisite excerpts of the Variations, matching the emotional ups and downs of the characters.

The play's interesting structure moves from past to present, tracking the scholar's fascination with Beethoven at the end of her life in counterpoint to Beethoven's troubles with his deafness, his debts and his struggle to finish the Variations. We see Beethoven (a tormented and angry *R Bruce Elliot*) arguing with his loving and much-put-upon servant Schindler (a harassed *Gordon Fox*). The movement is visually reflected in Bruce Coleman's set, which allows actors to move in and out of the three major playing areas – and each other's lives.

The story of the musicologist's relentless research is somehow not as moving as the music. Dr. Katherine Brandt (an efficient and steely-eyed *Sharon Garrison*) is at first a cerebral and cold woman, ignited into passion only when in pursuit of Beethoven's motives. She is distant with her adult daughter Clara (a vulnerably beautiful *Lydia Mackey*), who admires her mother enormously. Katherine is mostly condescending to Clara, scolding her for not sticking to a career -- or settling down with a proper mate.

Clara is concerned when her mother leaves for Europe, knowing her condition could worsen suddenly. But Katherine refuses Clara's offer to come along – and only sends short messages about her discoveries in Bonn to her daughter. In the meantime, Clara has begun a tentative relationship with a kind-hearted male nurse named Mike (a sweetly bumbling *Andrew Kasten*). Katherine, when she learns of this long distance, is unimpressed, having hoped for someone "more suitable" for Clara.

When Katherine's condition takes a turn for the worse, Clara packs up and takes off for Germany, with Mike in tow – and without her mother's permission. They set up a makeshift household, and Clara cooks for everyone while her mother continues her research. In the scenes where Mike and Clara help Katherine become adjusted to life in a

wheelchair, she becomes less cold, and more affecting. Her toughness is now directed to finishing her work, and she seems grateful for Clara's presence.

But Katherine is reluctant to share her deepest thoughts – and her wishes for her care if her condition becomes so severe she cannot communicate. She is much closer to Gertie (handsome *Terry McCracken* with a convincing German accent), the archivist at the Beethoven House – and the friend who ends up telling Katherine that she is at fault for not responding more fully to her daughter's love.

The final scene works best dramatically – and musically. The characters, their obsessions and their strained relationships are brought together, as the stage fills with light and everyone begins singing. This is a moving moment of resolution –with the promise of a kind of peace in a future beyond suffering. This Variation is grand, indeed.

33 Variations runs through October 30 at Theatre 3, 2800 Routh Street. Tickets are \$10 to \$40; for reservations, call 214-871-3300, or check online at www.theatre3dallas.com