

ARTS & LEISURE

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'Champagne Charlie' is a bet worth taking

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There has to be a specific reason when a play warrants a sign on the box office door saying: "This performance sold out."

And the reason for this announcement Sunday afternoon was because of the excellence of the Bruce Graham comedy, "The Champagne Charlie Stakes," the versatile and talented cast and the fruitful depth of direction by Michael J. Driscoll.

"The Champagne Charlie Stakes," which is being enacted by the Alliance Repertory Theater Co., located at the Union County Performing Arts Center Studio Theatre in Rahway on the second floor, may be considered a comedy, despite its dramatic and emotionally draining moments. The fact that the cast of five stupendous individuals can nurture comedic moments and suddenly turn an audience inside out is probably why every seat at the tiny theater was occupied.

The story is set in 1990 at a race track where a group of people have gathered to make small bets and watch the races through binoculars. It appears that an elderly woman named Mary, who is in wheelchair, showing early signs of Alzheimer's disease and in need of a knee operation, attempts to convince her daughter, Mary Lee, that she doesn't need the surgery, and that Mary Lee should go ahead with her plans to travel to Portugal with her friend, Paul.

In the meantime, Mary's husband, Charlie, who attempts to hide the fact that he is fatally ill and con-



Charlie, played by David Christopher, and his wife, Mary, played by Barbara Guidi, gaze lovingly into each other's eyes in the Alliance Repertory Theater Co.'s presentation of 'The Champagne Charlie Stakes.'

stantly leans on bottles of cheap champagne, has decided that he wants to bet a lifetime of savings, \$6,000, on a horse in the sixth race. He expects his winnings will pay for a party to be held at his funeral.

After many protestations from

his daughter and his best friend, Jackie, who is enlisted to place the bet for Charlie, an agreement is made. What happens after that has the audience hold its breath in anticipation.

There are many comedic

moments throughout the two-act play which help to alleviate some of the worrisome emotionalism.

However, it takes a superb group of actors, well-known members of this repertory theater, to involve the unprotected playgoers

in its many crises. It seems that every one of the members were born to their roles.

Barbara Guidi as Mary is excellent. An exceptional actor, she manages to roll around in her wheelchair, while exposing her love for her daughter, Mary Lee, and her undying concerns for her husband, Charlie.

Noreen Farley, as Mary Lee, is a lovely performer, and she has a fine flair for both comedy and drama. She can easily set the mood for every scene.

John Correll, as Jackie, has many funny moments and is convincing as the friend, who, despite his own aches and pains, loves Charlie's family unconditionally.

Chess Lankford, as Paul, Mary Lee's loving companion, is wonderful as he manages to put aside his own personal problems to inherit those of his fiancée's family.

However, it is David Christopher as Charlie who is thoroughly convincing and completely outstanding in a difficult role. He rounds up everyone's emotions, both actors and audience, and tears everyone apart with his acting abilities.

As artistic director, Driscoll has discovered a true vehicle for his actors in "The Champagne Charlie Stakes," which had its world premiere in April 1992, produced by the Philadelphia Festival Theatre for New Plays.

This play will run through Feb. 13. It appears that theatergoers are clamoring to witness it and digest it before it ends. It comes highly recommended.