

Meet “The Foreigner” at the Sierra Madre Playhouse

By Fran Syverson

Such mystique a foreigner can bring to a small town full of folks who've never had the chance to travel to other countries! Charlie Baker is endowed with that mystique when he arrives at Betty Meeks's fishing lodge in Georgia. In actuality, Betty is the one who does the endowing. She's never traveled nor met a “foreigner,” and is thrilled when her longtime friend S/Sgt. Froggy LeSueur (Mark Rainey) arrives and announces that his pal Charlie will be staying at the lodge for the weekend. There the fun begins, with many a hilarious cultural and linguistic misinterpretation!

Froggy means well. He knows that Charlie is totally depressed because his wife flaunts her many indiscretions before him. A weekend at the fishing lodge should give Charlie a relaxing getaway, Froggy is convinced. But not Charlie—he's painfully shy, miserable at small talk, and panicky at having to be with other guests.

Froggy to the rescue. He concocts a scheme wherein he'll introduce Charlie as a foreigner who knows no English. The fake language barrier will protect Charlie from having to speak with anyone. *Voila!*

This deception leads to hilarious situations when other people talk in front of him, fully confident that Charlie understands not a word. Catherine Simms's uncertain engagement and very certain pregnancy...a scheme to cheat Betty out of her lodge...a diabolical plot to “cleanse” the area of undesirables...Charlie is privy to all these conversations. But, of course, he can reveal nothing, because he “doesn't speak English.”

Shortly he gains a most unlikely tutor. Ellard Simms is Catherine's somewhat mentally challenged younger brother. Charlie and Ellard hit it off from the start. Ellard begins to teach Charlie some basic words. He's so delighted with himself when Charlie—playing along—manages to pronounce the words. Never mind that they're replete with a Southern accent in which one-syllable words become two syllables: “egg” becomes “ai-yeg” and lamp becomes “lay-amp.” The breakfast scene between the two of them, complete with a fencing duel with their knives, had the opening night audience in stitches.

Why, Ellard even “teaches” Charlie how to read—and Shakespeare, at that! What a romp, as we watch the linguistic shenanigans. J.R. Mangels nearly steals the show as Ellard.

Not to be missed is the scene in which Charlie is cornered into telling a funny story in his fake-native tongue. Kudos to Jon Powell for mastering those non-words for his soliloquy, and the wild gesturing to emphasize the actions. That alone is worth the price of admission!

The locals adore their token foreigner. As Betty, Joanie Marx smothers Charlie with her maternalistic Southern hospitality. Under the warm attention of Catherine (Lindsay Ballew) and other folks at the lodge, Charlie segues from shy to affable. But he still has to contend with Jay Bingham as the Rev. David Marshall Lee, a self-righteous, double-dealing fraud who is in cahoots with brash, overbearing Owen Musser (Jack Kennedy) as they scheme to abscond with Betty's lodge and Catherine's fortune.

Still, the impending personal tragedies are merely the background for the exuberant, comical gymnastics of the late Larry Shue's farce, one that has received numerous awards since its 1984 debut.

Stan Kelly reprises his directorial role, immediately following his summer run of “The Importance of Being Earnest.”

David Calhoun's set evokes the sense of a comfy, mildly rustic lodge living room. A wall of faux boulders brackets the room, and maple chairs, wood stove and chimney, and a brown sofa invite guests to relax. Adding authenticity are a red lantern, fishing net and oar, wood scuttle, barometer, vintage “Coke” plaques, and a “vacancy” sign. Calhoun's construction crew includes Justin Larsen and producer Ward Calaway.

Larsen is stage manager. Lois Tedrow returns as costume designer, a talent for which she is well-known at the Playhouse. Barry Schwam is sound designer, and Steve Shaw the sound operator. Lighting designer is Kristen Cox, and Schuyler Gamick the light operator.

Anne Marie Atwan and Ruth Thompson are in charge of properties. Calaway and John Johnson did the program design and production photography, while Johnson and Kelly created the poster art. Philip Sokoloff is publicist.

For all the fun that "The Foreigner" brings, it also thoughtfully reminds us of the nuances and pitfalls of our interpretation of others' customs. Enjoy this late fall comedy at the Sierra Madre Playhouse any weekend through Sat., Nov. 14. Curtain time is 8 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays and 2:30 p.m. for Sunday matinees. Admission is \$20 general, \$17 for seniors (65+) and students (13-17), and \$12 for children 12 years and under.

The Sierra Madre Playhouse is located at 87 W. Sierra Madre Blvd., Sierra Madre. City lots offer free parking. Pre-theater dining at local restaurants on Baldwin Avenue and Sierra Madre Boulevard can enhance the play-going experience. For ticket reservations or more information, phone (626) 355-4318, or visit the website, www.sierramadreplayhouse.org, for online ticketing.