

'Smokies' Smolders With a Fulfilled Dramatic Promise

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The inaugural work of the Norris Community Theater's New Play Discovery Series provided both a noteworthy retelling of a classic tale and an opportunity for the community to support one of its own.

That opportunity was not wasted Thursday night, when a nearly full house gave an enthusiastic reception to Myla Lichtman-Fields' Appalachian tragedy "Lord of the Smokies." As promised, the staged reading of Lichtman-Fields' play showed many of the possibilities and much of the promise woven into the work.

Following a long-time interest in things Appalachian, Lichtman-Fields even traveled to Tennessee's Great Smoky Mountains to absorb the sounds and flavors of the region. The tone of authenticity that results from her research proves that the mountains there have not yet been mined of all their dramatic potential.

Peopled by the simultaneously superstitious and God-fearing hill folk, Appalachia seems, in fact, to be the perfect setting for a new look at Euripides' tragedy of Hippolytus. Mindful

of the gods and doomed by fate, the Smoky Mountain hillbillies are America's ancient Greeks, and true to the play's classic roots, they are driven by passion to their ultimate undoing.

Written in three acts, "Lord of the Smokies" was presented in two halves Thursday night with an intermission bisecting Act Two. The first half unfolded with a steady momentum that seemed confused a bit in part two. This should, however, be overcome easily once the work is fully staged at the hands of a director who can help maintain the pace and strengthen a few of the peripheral characters.

Overall, the reading did justice to the author's research and gave ample evidence of her dramatist's skill. The bellowing Michael Putnam as Thaddeus Steed (Theseus), Linda Putnam as his tragic wife Fate O'Dare (Phaedra) and Warren Kaplan as Thaddeus' brother Hiram (Hippolytus) were compelling as the lead trio. With actors such as these, as well as the stony-faced Bob McCaman and the sage Billy Creamer in a fully staged production, "Lord of the Smokies" would indeed be something in which the author and her community could take pride.