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## Weighed Down *'The Whale'* takes on heavy subject matter

By Paul Wozniak for the Lansing City Pulse

At its core, playwright Samuel D. Hunter's "The Whale" is a devastating portrait of a morbidly obese man who sees the good in everyone except himself.

But it's also an uneven script that struggles under the weight of its own ambitions. To its credit, Peppermint Creek Theatre Co. has never shied from producing challenging scripts, especially when they're richly layered with humor and a strong message of tolerance. In this case, the production strives for greatness but frequently stumbles along the way.

Richard Kirkwood (in a fairly convincing fat suit) plays Charlie, the "whale," a morbidly obese man whose girth leaves a lasting indentation in the couch. Charlie seems pretty settled on his daily routine of teaching online writing classes and slowly eating himself to death. He is aided by his concerned friend and home nurse, Liz (Anna Szabo).



Charlie is still mourning the death of his late partner, Allan, who starved himself to death. Charlie believes Allan's church — the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — played a role in Allan's apparent suicide. When a lone Mormon missionary, Elder Thomas (Ben Cassidy), knocks on Charlie's door, Charlie asks him to investigate. Meanwhile, Charlie reaches out to his estranged daughter, Ellie (Rebecca MacCreery), offering his life's savings if she spends time with him.

If that sounds like a lot to follow, just wait. There's plenty more as the play progresses. For a show about a 600 pound sedentary man, there's a surprising amount of movement in this show. The plot comes to Charlie like light to a black hole, and director Jordan Climie rarely allows his actors to sit for very long.

Kirkwood breaths and moves realistically, portraying a man who gets winded just by standing up. His dry delivery works best when he's speaking to his laptop, lecturing his students — or responding to the discussion boards where they often vent about their teacher.

“Do you realize I can access the class discussion board?” he asks.

Unfortunately, Kirkwood's labored delivery feels more like poorly memorized lines when conversing with his cast mates.

MacCreery and Cassidy provide the shows strongest performances. Ellie is a sharp caricature of the ultimate teenage mean girl who wields her wit like a knife. MacCreery sinks her teeth into the role and doesn't let go. She delivers scathing — and often hilarious — barbs at her father and on her “hate blog,” where she turns people into targets for intense ridicule. To the audience, she's a monster. But her father's empathetic lens makes him immune to her relentless attacks.

Far less immune is Elder Thomas. Cassidy's Elder Thomas could have walked off the “Book of Mormon” set (sans the ironic wink) with his baby face and earnest delivery. But Cassidy demonstrates his range and astute understanding of his character in Act II as the plot veers down a dark path.

The strongest technical element is the set (designed by Blake Bowen and Chad Swan- Badgero), a disgustingly realistic recreation of a rancid apartment — complete with nasty carpet and dented furniture. You can practically smell the reek of spoiled food.

(Considering all the empty KFC buckets and open bags of chips on stage, it's a small miracle that ants aren't crawling everywhere.)

The show's biggest hurdle is the script itself, which sets up a dramatic indictment of Mormonism and its position on homosexuality. Certainly Hunter has a point to make about injustice and homophobia, but his attacks seem out of place relative to the primary thesis of forgiveness and tolerance personified by his central character.

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## “The Whale”

Peppermint Creek Theatre Co. 8 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 1-Saturday, Oct. 3; 2 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 4 \$15/\$10 student and seniors Miller Performing Arts Center 6025 Curry Lane, Lansing (517) 927-3016, peppermintcreek.org

