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'Saving Portsmouth' brings history to life at Strawberry Banke

The site of today's Strawberry Banke Museum before the crusading preservation efforts of Portsmouth librarian Dorothy Vaughan. Courtesy photo

Kent Stephens' latest Heritage Project, "Saving Portsmouth: The Preservation Crusade of Miss Dorothy Vaughan," is a time-meld probe into historical preservation that is sometimes uncomfortable, others funny, and always informative.

It features familiar names, and slightly veiled local figures, deceased and current, and lots of cringeworthy attitudes pro and con.

The vehicle is Vaughan, her position in the community and how people recall her accomplishments — the latter a kaleidoscope of conflict, right up there with preservation itself.

Vaughan began work at the Portsmouth City Library in her teens and continued for more than a half century, acting as its head librarian for most of those years. She developed a driving passion for historical preservation early on.

These statements are likely truth, the play asserts. In the 1950s Vaughan gave a speech at the Portsmouth Rotary that is credited with inspiring the city's preservation movement — at least by some, the script notes.

The librarian certainly played a part in Portsmouth's preservation, but how much is contested. To some she's a saint, to others an embarrassment; to Stephens, she is the perfect way to enter a past and present conversation on historical preservation: what to keep and

how to keep it.

The script explores opposing sides through conversations between four contemporary figures and the “Playwright,” who narrates, and with more traditional theater scenes set in Vaughan’s era.

Contemporary characters also occasionally break fourth wall and speak directly to the audience.

The play’s history is rich, well presented and interesting. The material is dense, but affecting, amusing or informative enough to keep the audience engaged.

The current production is “Vaughan’s” first on stage; perfection isn’t expected. Its dialogue is comfortable and natural, but for the occasional more instructive or theatrical moment. Certain scenes could use tightening, notably the end, which seems to have three finishes: words by the “writer,” then Vaughan, and again the writer with sentimental — though emotionally moving for people who love their town — words about the city.

Stephens’ Banke-based historical plays are always about Portsmouth and its people. Some lean toward more traditional theater, others are more instructive. This one is mixed, but tends to the latter. Its success is not based on the traditional theater model, but a standard that enlivens and enhances history and the art of storytelling. That is the production’s strength — that and its cast.

To a person, “Saving” Portsmouth’s” actors delivers.

Leslie Pasternack, as Vaughan, builds a thoroughly believable person, a woman of a certain era and specific nature. It’s a great characterization, deftly executed.

CJ Lewis is Playwright, and per his usual, it's a smart, personality-infused performance that includes a few mannerisms of the actual playwright. It’s another strong performance.

And so it goes with the remaining four actors: Kolby Hume, Kathy Somssich, Christopher Savage and James Sears, who perform numerous characters, and all as they should be.

The set, aptly designed by Szu-Feng Chen, is a simple exterior brick wall backdrop. Images, the work of Visual and Sound Designer Shay Willard, are projected above the wall setting mood or enhancing

information.

All the supportive arts are just that, including costume design by Danica Carlson, and lighting by Matthew B. Cost.

“Saving Portsmouth” is a clever hybrid of theater and history, an interesting portrait of a woman, a review of Portsmouth’s path to a city that cares about its history, and fodder for the road ahead.