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Review: **THE BOOK CLUB PLAY at the Barn**: **A Novel Comedy Worth Discussing**

By: Paul Recupero

THE BOOK CLUB PLAY is a modern spin on the drawing room comedy, using a documentary camera to expose how quickly people begin performing versions of themselves. It serves as an entertaining centerpiece at the midpoint of the Barn Playhouse's current season.

The play involves a small group who meet every two weeks to discuss classic literature. There's the perfectionistic op-ed columnist Ana (Alyssa Muska), who hosts the book club along with Rob (Josh Muska), her less-than-enthusiastic husband (also in real life—her husband, not the less-than-enthusiastic part) who has little to no interest in books. Joining them is their pedantic mutual friend Will (Rob Frankel), who is just a step shy of pompous; Jen (Natalie Merlino), Ana's good friend and overall aloof wallflower; and Lily (Tiana Richardson), an outgoing relative newcomer who charms as the group's sole "Akron-American."

What had started as a casual gathering appears to be gaining traction. Ana has captured the attention of a renowned European documentarian in the vein of Werner Herzog, who is interested in bringing the group's book club to life onscreen. A large camera now dominates the living room to capture footage, but what is intended to be a fly on the wall turns many of the group into performance artists mugging for screen time. While dismayed by the group's lack of focus, the hyperfixated Ana is determined to make the documentary happen through gritted teeth. That determination is tested further when she butts ideological heads with the group's newest member and professor of comparative literature, Alex (Eric Rupp), who argues that Stephenie Meyer's TWILIGHT deserves the same critical consideration as Melville and Brontë.

THE BOOK CLUB PLAY, by Karen Zacarias, is an ensemble comedy that excels with grounded humor that the Barn's production, co-directed by Eileen Ciccarone and John Henken, handles notably well. The show's cozy start embraces the audience before things start sliding off the rails. The fixed documentary camera—visible in the house—is a clever way for the characters and the audience to peer through the fourth wall without actually breaking it. Its presence also creates another layer of performance, as the characters become increasingly aware of the gap between their private selves and the versions they present for the camera.

An ensemble play rests on its performers, and the fleshed-out characters in the Barn's production are relatable and engaging. Each character gets moments to shine and evolve, including a particularly funny development involving Will. While all the actors give praiseworthy performances, Alyssa Muska's nuanced depiction of type-A personality Ana is superb. Ana has the most at stake and the widest character arc, and Muska gives a lived-in performance that happens to be hysterical, as opposed to just gunning for the laughs. The same can be said for the other roles, but Ana is a narrow-minded micromanager who would be easy to dislike, and yet Muska allows us to sympathize with Ana as she desperately (and fruitlessly) tries to hold on to the fracturing group.

Although confined to a single set, both the unfolding drama and the staging remain in constant motion. The blocking is naturally fluid without being distracting. While the script runs a little long, the ending takes an interesting turn, though a couple minor subplots are wrapped up a bit too quickly and neatly.

The realistic living room set (designed by Steve DiNenno) is stylish while still giving just a hint of modern sterility, accented by cool tones. The visible documentary camera allowed for a lot of gags and funny double-takes as exposed characters suddenly remembered its existence. However, it was unclear if the camera was physically accessible to the characters. Late in the play, a character seemingly lunged for the camera, which was followed by a sudden blackout. When the lights returned, the camera was still there, and I didn't follow what had happened.

THE BOOK CLUB PLAY is an enjoyable and endearing production that proves even a simple gathering of friends can become a fascinating study in how people present themselves. But the length of this run is more "short story" than "novel," so there are only a few more opportunities to catch it.

If You Go…

THE BOOK CLUB PLAY

By Karen Zacarias

Directed by Eileen Ciccarone & John Henken

July 10−19, 2026

The Barn Playhouse

1700 Christopher Lane

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