



'The Summer House' delivers insight into the James Gang Wives

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Notorious outlaws Jesse and Frank James return to Missouri with the KC Fringe Festival piece "The Summer House" with a charming piece by Kristie Kennard that sheds a softer light onto the notorious bad men with a story about their wives and an attempt for normalcy.

Frank and Jesse James moved to Kentucky for a spell and attempted to settle their wives in a nice home in Nashville, away from the stories and gossip of others who exaggerated and told stories of the James Gang. Outlaws, to be sure, yet wanting a more normal life for their families, the men "traveled for work" and left the spouses home to tend the children.

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In that setting Bob Linebarger, director, created a beautiful piece with the play by Kristie Kennard, beautiful costumes by Mary Traylor, period props by Regina Weller, and stage management by Robin Harman. For a one-hour Fringe entry, the production stands out among the best team effort this season.

For “The Summer House; The Secret Lives of the Wives of Frank and Jesse James” Linebarger selected a sturdy cast of seasoned KC actors who knew how to fulfil their characters and make them extremely realistic and full. His cast is Emmy Panzeka-Piontec as Zee James/Josie Howard, Stefanie Stephens as Anna

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James/Fannie Woodson, Marek Burns as Jesse Edwards James/Tim Howard, Casey Jane as Kate Cantrell, Margaret Selby as Ellen Cantrell, Sam Wright as Bill Ryan/Tom Hill.

Each actor delivers a character that shows multi-facets of characterization. Each has sturdy dialogue to deliver. Each has both soft and harsh sides to show. All give some light-hearted lines to give the characters some sympathy from the

viewers. And, all seem to work well together in creating a beautiful tableau of the 1800s in Tennessee.



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Part of the draw for this piece is the connection to Jesse James and his notorious adventures near the Kansas City area. Some of his activity occurred within a 60-mile radius of the metro, and some of his “digs” and “home” still exist in the St. Joe area.

“The Summer House” takes a different look at Frank and Jesse by focusing on their wives and the neighbor ladies who befriend them in their temporary situation. The story comes alive with the fantastic performances turned in by the cast.

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Casey Jane, Stephanie Stevens, and EmmyPanzeka-Piontec charm the audience with their characters in need to find normalcy in their awkward lives. Each carries secrets known to the audience but not fully revealed to each other. Each of the women have dreams and fears about family, happiness, and their

futures.

Seemingly villains, Margaret Selby gives a fun performance as the social-conscious neighbor who reluctantly becomes involved with the two new neighbors. She's both neighborhood busy-body, but so aware of local society necessities. Selby nails the character with her gestures, delivery, and uppity attitude. As for a villain, Sam



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Wright plays a drunken Irishman who can pick a guitar, sing, and get drunk with the best of them. He represents the uneducated Irish who came to America in search of wealth and a fresh start but found the goings tougher than expected. His nose-dive into crime displays his lack of planning, scope of exposure, and his violent, womanizing ways. Although the character starts with light-heartedness, Wright takes him to a drunken, womanizing scoundrel who cannot conceal his newfound wealth after a robbery.

As the youngest member of the cast Marek Burns is not called on to do much. He adds a tenderness to the story as Jesse's son and in his scenes he always draws the attention away from the adults on stage. He's gifted, well-trained, and an up-and-coming performer. He will charm the audience with his few scenes.



The show is a lot of fun, and it is certainly not a heavy drama. “The Summer House” is a tender surprise about two tough and rough Wild West outlaws.

“Kate Eastman is determined to make friends with her reclusive neighbors, Mrs. Woodson and Mrs. Howard, newly arrived in Nashville in 1881. Little does she know they are the wives of outlaws Frank and Jesse James. Complications arise when a Missouri gang member, Bill Ryan, shows up to lend the husbands a hand. Based on a true story. Directed by Bob Linebarger. Starring Casey Jane, Emmy Panzica-Piontec, Stephanie Stevens, Margaret Shelby, Sam Wright, and Marek Burns. Costumes by Mary Traylor.” (KC Fringe)

Tags: “The Summer House” review, Kansas City Fringe Festival, Kansas City Theatre, Kansas City Performing Arts, Kansas City Arts & Entertainment