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## Kent-Trumbull's 'Cell Phone' is a call worth answering

3-4 minutes

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CHAMPION — Those little devices intended to keep people connected only have made them more isolated from one another.

That's one of many ideas Sarah Ruhl plays with in "Dead Man's Cell Phone," a quirky comedy that is halfway through a six-performance run at Kent State University at Trumbull theater. The play may be 12 years old, but its story probably is more true today.

The first act is somewhat straight forward, focusing on Jean (Jennifer Ruth), a cafe customer whose lunch is disturbed by an incessantly ringing cell phone. Turns out the owner of the phone died at his table. Jean starts answering his calls, getting entangled in his life and feeling a connection to a man she never met that clearly is greater than any connection she has to someone living.

In a preview story last week, director Eric Kildow described the play as having a structure similar to a Raymond Chandler detective novel. That's true, but it's closer to filmmaker Robert Altman's oddball take on Chandler's "The Long Goodbye" in 1973 than the 1940s film noir tales based on his books.

The eccentrics calling the phone include a mysterious business colleague (Valerie Gilbert); the dead man's blunt, meat-loving

mother (Jenna Cintavey); his not-quite-grieving widow (Kenzie Critzer); and a meek brother (Jacob Glosser) who appears to have lived his life in his brother's shadow.

Kildow coaxes strong performances from the entire cast. Cintavey bellows her every line in a broad portrayal that works within the context of the play and makes her the comedic standout. Ruth holds the whole thing together with the sincerity she delivers even the most outrageous dialogue and her reactions to the increasing craziness around her.

If the first act is quirky and a little absurd, the second act takes a sharp left into surrealism, starting with a long, vicious and hilarious monologue by Peter Byrne playing ... well, it's best to let adventurous audiences discover that on their own.

The set is simple but effective — a bare platform changed into a variety of locations with tables and chairs brought out by a trio of waiters (Kirstin Johnson, Justin Pickett and Aisha Khulifat) and a screen used to project different backdrops. The use of Edward Hopper-esque art work for the backdrops was a smart choice. No artist was better at creating a sense of isolation in his work, and that complements the themes of the play.

“Dead Man’s Cell Phone” takes audiences on a twisted journey. It’s not a traditional comedy by any stretch of the imagination, but there are laughs along the way and a nice payoff at the end.

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