

**“SYLVIA”**  
**Bas Bleu Theatre Company**  
**By Rachel Cassidy**

Occasionally, there comes a role for which an actor is born, as is gloriously proven by Deb Note-Farwell in Bas Bleu Theatre Company’s current production, “Sylvia.” Note-Farwell was clearly born – no, rather, if I may, “whelped,” – to anthropomorphize the adorable stray doggie that playwright A. R. Gurney created so authentically.

For anyone who has ever shared a home with a canine, swept up pounds of dog hair, de-flea-ed a house, mopped up piddles, scooped poopie, been bathed by a pink tongued puppy, been awakened by frantic whining, or rescued by alarm barking, or shared the myriad blessings of having a pooch in residence, the antics of Sylvia and her master, Greg, which nearly put Greg’s wife, Kate, into a strait jacket, will evoke as full a range of emotion as living with a critter can provide. One laughs and chuckles and nods knowingly and weeps and leaves the theatre enriched by experiencing vicariously having such a furry, frantic, loving friend.

Under the commanding and witty direction of Jonathan Farwell, who has bravely chosen to direct the play and perform as Greg, “Sylvia” flourishes, nourishes and delights.

With brilliant scenic and lighting design by Dennis Madigan, costuming by Pam Short that enchants, and beautifully apt music by Michael Borello, that becomes a character in itself, “Sylvia” is a totality of excellent theatre.

Deborah Persoff plays Kate, a woman who has lived in love with Greg for 32 years, raised his kids to college age and now seeks a career of her own as a teacher who adores English and Shakespeare and wishes to impart her knowledge and love to New York City’s students. Persoff’s Kate is classy, erudite, sleek and determined. She finds Greg’s new passion for Sylvia intrusive and obstructive in their lives, and she wants the dog gone. Greg, fed up with his go-nowhere job, becomes increasingly obsessed with Sylvia, and he fights with Kate, the rival unsplayed female, to Sylvia’s huge, and somewhat bitchy, delight.&nb sp;

It is a paean to Gurney’s play that we seem to find no difficulty in believing that the humans not only understand Sylvia’s dog-speak, but can hold wide-ranging conversations with her. Note-Farwell’s Sylvia, however, never lets us forget that despite her linguistic and philosophical gifts, she is a dog. She moves like a dog, walks like a dog, loves like a dog, plays like a dog, and has us easily eating out of her paws.

And then there is the charming triple performance of Bill Koch. First, he is Tom, whom Greg meets at a doggie park, an armchair animalist and owner of a studly Golden Retriever who deflowers Sylvia. Next, he is Kate’s friend, Phyllis, an upscale New York East-sider who visits her purse and its hidden flask whenever Kate is out of the room. Phyllis, stylish in vivid red and black, with crimson nails and finely coiffed hair, captures the essence of uptown posh as she slowly and hilariously succumbs to her vodka. Finally, Koch appears as Leslie, Kate’s psychotherapist who chooses to remain without gender identification and demonstrates that shrinks desperately need shrinking, to o.

In the hands of a lesser director and cast, “Sylvia” would provide merely straight men for the amazing antics of Note-Farwell, but what emerges is clear love of and respect for the material and each other.

Try as I might, I could find nothing amiss, technically or artistically, except for the well-executed but obviously unweighted rock in the park scene. On opening night, however, a couple of wonderful ad libs covered the rock’s inadvertent perambulations, but I doubt subsequent audiences will find even that to carp about.

Somehow, these players have found the path to enlightenment that the mystical dog-human relationship can provide. Two quotations are my proof: “A dog is the only thing on earth that loves you more than he loves himself,” said Josh Billings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Maurice Maeterlinck later said, “We are alone, absolutely alone on this chance planet; and, amid all the forms of life that surround us, not one, excepting the dog, has made an alliance with us.”

And let us bark, “Amen.”