

A Good Reed Review



Dragon Productions Theatre is known for presenting avant-garde works, but where do they come from? Their current production of playwright Colette Freedman's "Sister Cities" has an interesting genesis. Inspired by her best friend Jill Gascoine's claim that she was retiring from the stage and would only act again if she could play a corpse, Freedman set out to write a play built around a dead body. Of course she couldn't have a corpse as a central character without a compelling back story, including something about the corpse's family and how the death occurred. Drawing from her own experience and recalling her aunt who had Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), more commonly known as "Lou Gehrig's Disease", she wove ALS into the story as well.

The result of Freedman's labor is a story about Mary (Shelley Lynn Johnson), a former dancer, and a four time divorcee. She's the mother of four girls, each from a different father, and except for the eldest, each is named after the city in which she was born. Carolina (Kim Saunders) is forty, a hard-driving lawyer, and is recently divorced. Austin (Darcie Lee Grover) is thirty-six, lives with Mary, is a successful writer, is athletic, and, much to Mary's chagrin, is gay. Dallas (Alexandra Bogorad) is thirty, the archetypical sorority girl, is a school teacher, and lives in the suburbs with her husband of several years. Finally, Baltimore (Katie Rose Krueger) is twenty-six, the youngest of the bunch, who's trying to find herself as a graduate student studying sociology at Harvard.

The sisters aren't close, and in fact in some cases are almost estranged, but they come together in the wake of Mary's sudden death, an apparent suicide, with Mary's body lying in the bathtub when they arrive. Throughout Act 1, the sisters banter, using black humor to try to deal with this rather startling event, not quite sure how to approach one another or the situation. Austin, having lived with Mary for some time, knew that their mother was sick and suffering from ALS. As the story progresses, Austin has to illustrate the horror that their mother has been living with in a most compelling way.

In Act 2, we finally meet Mary in a flashback with Austin a week before her death when Mary finally gets Austin's attention and makes her understand Mary's condition. Later, we learn all four sisters have skeletons in their closets that they've carefully concealed from one another. Eventually the masks come off, and they each gain a greater appreciation for and understanding of each other.

Freedman's writing throughout the play captures both the patient's perspective and the family's anguish in dealing with such a horrific disease realistically as this reviewer can attest based on recent experience. Even the black humor employed as a protective device in dealing with such dire circumstances reads with authenticity.

Neal Ormond's unit set captures Mary's living room nicely. The furniture is believable, and the details are exquisite with family pictures on the walls showing them all from various times during their lives. The door to the bathroom is evident, and while the tub isn't seen, the "tiled" wall is through the door. The front door and window to the outside are evident upstage, and are appropriately appointed. Unfortunately, the doors closing had a tendency to knock a couple of pictures off the wall on opening night – they need to be anchored a bit better.

Director Dale Albright has assembled a strong cast thrust into a play guaranteed to draw powerful emotional responses from the audience.

Saunders' Carolina has to negotiate the challenge of having to be both unlikable and growing into a sympathetic character as the play progresses. She has to retain an edge, and handles that transition with grace and verve. Her primary interactions are with Grover's Austin, and the two are very believable in their "courtroom-like" drama.

Grover's Austin has to negotiate the biggest emotional swing of the five cast members, without playing it too campy. Austin uses dark humor to deal with her mother's death, and Grover captures Austin's inner conflict visibly and realistically. She's likable, and shows tremendous compassion, even when being rather snarky at times.

Krueger's Baltimore is "the kid". While Krueger is slightly older than her character, her energy and girlish charm are convincingly collegiate. She's alternately light hearted and doggedly focused pushing Austin about one inconsistency in her story.

Bogorad's Dallas is appropriately flighty, though there's more to the character. The

quintessential pleaser, down to her matching underwear, she also appears risk and trauma avoidant, or so we think.

Johnson's Mary is in some ways the most difficult role. Only visible in the one flashback scene, her character's presence has to be felt throughout the play; after all, it's her death and influence that overshadows all. Johnson navigates this well maintaining consistency with the previous action, and her scene with Grover is perhaps the most poignant of the piece.

There are only a few small things that don't quite work, and they largely relate to the staging. The first is at the top of Act 2. While talking with Austin, Mary is supposed to have deteriorated to the point of severely limited physicality, but she moves too fluidly at that point. The following reminiscence, which is clearly in Mary's mind, with its accompanying lighting change and movement would work better were she more rigid and less graceful prior to that. The staging toward the end of the play also doesn't quite work. The sisters stop facing one another and instead face the audience while ostensibly talking to each other causing the sequence to read too recitative. The ending of the play also isn't clean; the concept works, but it struggles to end and eventually does so rather abruptly.

In spite of a few minor quibbles, "Sister Cities" is a powerful play worth seeing. Because of the serious subject matter and some adult language, it's not appropriate for young children. The show continues Thursdays-Sundays through 23 October 2011 at the 42-seat Dragon Theatre located at 535 Alma Street, Palo Alto, CA 94301. See <http://www.dragonproductions.net> or call 650-493-2006 for more information.

(Photo credit: James Kasyan)

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