

Palo Alto Online Palo Alto Weekly: Humor and heart over unlikely subject (October 7, 2011)

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Humor and heart over unlikely subject

'Sister Cities' is clever and captivating

by Jeanie K. Smith

You may not have heard of playwright Colette Freedman, but she's one of the most prolific writers for the stage, garnering numerous awards for her 25 plays thus far, including the comedy "Sister Cities," currently being performed at the Dragon Theatre in downtown Palo Alto.

A comedy it most assuredly is, even though the plot centers on the suicide of the mother of four grown daughters. Unbeknownst to three of the four, mother Mary (Shelley Lynn Johnson) had developed ALS in the last two years, and as the disease progressed, she desired nothing more than to be released from her suffering. Her daughters — all named after the city or state they were born in — gather to mourn and decide how to handle her death. They're in for quite a few surprises as the plot unfolds.

Oldest daughter Carolina (Kim Saunders) has built a successful law career, but hasn't managed to achieve happiness in relationships. Austin (Darcie Lee Grover) has won awards and acclaim for an early novel, but now can't muster up a paragraph. She moved back home with mom a while back, presumably to help care for her, but it's also clearly a retreat of sorts.

Dallas (Alexandra Bogorad) seems happy to be a housewife with a loving husband, but has her own dark secret to reveal. And the youngest, Baltimore (Katie Rose Krueger), is proudly pursuing a degree in sociology at Harvard — or, is she?

Facades crumble and secrets tumble out as the four women begin peeling away the years of separation and come face to face with several realities: their own, the reality of their mother's illness, and one huge reveal that propels them into catharsis.

While the plot revolves around this major issue that I won't spoil for you, still there is abundant humor in the witty dialogue and the well-drawn characters as they get reacquainted. Freedman has a knack for spot-on one-liners, and in this context they provide

surprising and welcome relief from what could be a deadly subject (no pun intended). The heartbreak of ALS and the mother's choice of suicide are not dealt with lightly, but they are made bearable by the deft writing. In fact, there is a thoughtful presentation of differing sides of an argument, enough to prompt discussion over after-show drinks.

But the four daughters need a kick in the pants to get them out of their various stuck places, and that's really where the play takes us — ultimately a warm and generous place of fresh starts and sea changes, courtesy of family crisis.

The five actresses are well-matched to their roles, and are all adept at handling the comedy as well as the pathos. Saunders is excellent as the uptight Carolina who perhaps undergoes the most change, putting a new spin on "letting her hair down." Bogorad is suitably preppy and perky, and Johnson gives a convincing portrayal of a woman who has accepted her fate and now merely wants relief. Krueger is cute as a button, sassy and smart and delightful; hopefully we'll get to see more of her on local stages.

But the real standout of the ensemble is Grover as Austin, deadpanning her way through the play with ease, then delivering punch and vinegar when needed with equal aplomb and emotion. Her energy so nicely contrasts with that of the other sisters that it's great fun watching them collide with her seeming nonchalance.

Neal Ormond's set is both serviceable and attractive, a cheerful middle-class living room with a bit of taste and a touch of schmaltz. Steve Shumway's lighting provides demarcation when needed, and Rosie Ricca's costuming nicely breaks out the characters for us — even down to the underwear.

Director Dale Albright does a great job with pacing and comic timing, and keeps the show from slipping into maudlin territory. His deft direction, a talented cast, and an intriguing and funny script make for a very entertaining evening at the Dragon.

What: "Sister Cities," by Colette Freedman, presented by Dragon Productions Theatre Company

Where: Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St., Palo Alto

When: Through October 23, Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m., Sundays at 2 p.m.

Cost: Tickets are \$16-\$30.

Info: Go to dragonproductions.net or call 800-838-3006.