

Theater review: 'Memory of Water in Palo Alto

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Every theater production makes a deal with its audience. The audience makes an effort to at least pretend they are in Verona or Elsinore or on 42nd Street, and the actors and production crew endeavor to make that effort worthwhile.

In "The Memory of Water," at Dragon Theatre in Palo Alto, the audience has to make a bit more of an effort, because of what may have been a mistake: To allow the cast to attempt to do this play, by Shelagh Stephenson, with British accents.

"Oh look," the audience may think, "here are a bunch of people trying to sound as if they are from Great Britain."

But give it some time, forget about the fact that the accents come and go, and there is a very earnestly presented play here, well worth seeing, with a few excellent performances and a remainder that will suffice.

It's a play that could use some editing — which is why, perhaps, it is not overly produced. But it is a rich piece of work that balances some grim truths with fine touches of humor.

We are on hand for the funeral of Vi, at her home on the northeast coast of England. Her three daughters have gathered to deal with Vi's home and belongings and to get her cremated.

Laura Jane Bailey is Theresa, the oldest sister, who has long thought she is the only responsible one, the one who does all the work. Janine Evans is the youngest, Catherine, whose life is a continuous mess of men and not having enough money. Carrying in shopping bags, she says "Broke doesn't mean you can't buy things!"

Meredith Hagedorn, founder and managing artistic director of Dragon, is Mary, the middle daughter, and the emotional core of this play. Hagedorn may not be hired to teach diction at Oxford anytime soon, but her performance is otherwise excellent; she holds the center, while the flanks sometimes weaken. She is a joy to watch, as she carries the emotional truth of each scene on her shoulders.

Also quite good is Lessa Bouchard as Vi, who appears only to Mary, in scenes lit with watery shadows.

Mary has the most painful memory from childhood. And the last years of Vi's life were a decline into Alzheimer's, and so now that she is dead, she has an issue or two of her own to wrap up before she wanders off to the afterlife.

"I'm proud of you," Vi tells Mary, "And you are ashamed of me."

Early in the play someone says "Someone dies, you drink whiskey. It's normal."

And it becomes a factor, as does marijuana. As the play progresses we discover the unhappy truths about each woman's life. Catherine's latest lover (out of 78, she keeps count) is dumping her. Theresa, as her husband Frank tells her, really shouldn't drink. And as we learn, she is bottled up tight because she has real monsters inside her (emotionally speaking, anyway).

And it seems Mary's issue might be that she is pregnant, by her married lover, Mike.

But it's not that simple. Mike has had a vasectomy, which is news to her; after four years with Mary, he still won't leave his wife. And Mary, who has carried guilt and hope around with her for 25 years after having a child and giving him up for adoption when she was 14, learns something truly heart-breaking.

The second half of the play is emotionally wrenching. Mary remains the center of the play, and Hagedorn is very strong in the role. Mary is the one who, ultimately, must find a stoic way to survive in a cold, cold world.

Noel Wood is amusing as Frank. With a shaved head and glasses, he somehow reminds, in looks and performance, of Al Franken before he joined the Senate. His accent is like one of those seven-day, seven-nation tours of Europe. Patrick Borella as Mike is patronizing and always right, a Palo Alto young professional.

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Theater review

What: "The Memory of Water"

Upshot: Earnest local show worth seeing

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

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays

Through: Sept. 13

Tickets: \$16-\$20; 650-493-2006 or
www.dragonproductions.net