

# Palo Alto Online Palo Alto Weekly: A turbulent flight (June 3, 2011)

Arts & Entertainment - Friday, June 3, 2011

## A turbulent flight

*Theatrical tale of a rescue pilot is weighed down by clumsy metaphors and set design*

by Kevin Kirby

Every script is a complex problem-solving exercise for the theater company that chooses to produce it. Finding the right actors, costuming them appropriately, creating a believable physical environment on stage, producing the needed special effects (anything from a ringing doorbell to the sinking of the Titanic), and blending all of these elements into a well-paced, stylistically seamless whole: These are a few of the challenges that directors and designers face on every outing. And often, for small theaters especially, the most daunting piece of the puzzle is how to accomplish all of this with limited resources.

With its current show, Ellen McLaughlin's "Tongue of a Bird," Dragon Productions has solved most but not all of the script's challenges. The opening-night performance felt like a nearly-there dress rehearsal, with the reasonably talented cast still grappling with the playwright's language and undercut by a set design that is marginally functional at best.

McLaughlin's language is complex, her story layered and oblique. The central character is Maxine, a young search-and-rescue pilot whose never-give-up attitude has led to a 100 percent success rate. Returning to her childhood home to search for a 12-year-old girl who has vanished into the snowy Adirondacks with her unknown abductor, Maxine finds herself once again living with her Polish-immigrant grandmother, Zofia, who raised Maxine after her mother's suicide.

To the delight of Zofia, who has made a lifetime habit of throwing away anything that might weigh her down, Maxine seems to have brought all her worldly possessions — apart from her plane — in a duffle bag. But Max has also brought something else that she does not disclose: ghosts. She is visited more and more often by the ghost of her mad mother, who comes wearing the iconic garb of lost flyer Amelia Earhart. And now there is a second spirit: a young girl — perhaps the missing child whose fate is

still unknown, or perhaps the spirit of Max's younger self.

Actress Kateri Rose has her work cut out for her in the role of Max. On stage almost continuously and often alone, she is burdened from the start with page-long soliloquies, poetical language and metaphors that stick out like metaphorical sore thumbs. Rose does some lovely work throughout the evening — not letting Max's emotional distress peak too early, and really delivering the goods in her final, heartrending scenes — but she never quite gets a handle on the language. As a result, the words sound more like McLaughlin's than Max's, and the metaphors feel artificial.

(When Max explains that police roadblocks forced the kidnapper up into the mountains where he couldn't get out, we are supposed to recall her earlier observation about a fly buzzing higher up a windowpane when it cannot escape. The problem is, our awareness that we are *supposed* to make this connection takes us away from the scene.)

The actor who does the best job with McLaughlin's writerly prose is Sandy Pardini Cashmark as Zofia. She finds the perfect "throw away" delivery for even the most blatantly crafted lines (which is fitting, as Zofia counsels her granddaughter that we should be able to throw even our most precious possessions into the sea). That talent, combined with an unwavering Eastern European accent and a world-weariness befitting a woman who survived World War II, make Zofia a thoroughly believable character.

The other standout performance comes from Heidi Kobara as Dessa, the missing child's mother. At turns frantic, resolute, wrung out and stoic, she has an energy that zaps the play to life and an emotional jeopardy that strings us along. When the subject of Max's mother's suicide arises during one of Max and Dessa's many talks, Kobara's matter-of-fact delivery of "I've been thinking about pills" is simply chilling. A later scene in which Max allows Dessa to join her on a nighttime fly-over is effective in cementing the characters' relationship, even if the pair don't quite reach the right note of giddy exhaustion when the conversation turns momentarily funny.

Rounding out the cast are Leah Kolchinsky (subtly unsettling as the "ghost" child) and Kerry Michelle Smith as Max's mother. Smith's early scenes — all flighty madness and sugary-toned nonsense — add little to the production. By the second act, though, she has stopped playing madness and begun to play a specific character, and her final scene with Max is genuinely touching.

Sadly, that last scene — the moment of emotional reconciliation toward which the entire play has built — is nearly ruined by a set-design failure that also mars several earlier scenes. More on that in a moment.

One of the greatest problem-solving challenges in bringing "Tongue of a Bird" to the Dragon stage fell to set designer John S. Boles. The action alternates rapidly among the cockpit of Max's plane, her bedroom in Zofia's house, the airplane hangar and Zofia's living room. To avoid lengthy scene changes, Boles' design leaves elements of each location on stage at all times. The idea is right, but the execution is awful. The cockpit (simple but believable), Zofia's ratty overchair and a combination refrigerator/vending machine are crowded together in an aesthetically displeasing jumble, surrounded by off-blue drapes that are presumably meant to suggest the sky but actually suggest drowning. For some scenes, the cockpit rotates out of sight, revealing Max's bed in its place. One is tempted to call the raised turntable "small," but it takes up nearly half of the tiny Dragon stage.

To complicate matters further, the script calls for ghosts — ethereal, flickery, out-of-nowhere ghosts — to appear in both the bedroom and the cockpit. These magical comings and goings take place behind a scrim: a sheer fabric that is opaque when lit from the front but translucent when lit from behind. One moment, there is a blank wall behind Max; the next moment, with a simple lighting shift, there is a ghost hovering above her.

The effect would work well except that someone — either McLaughlin or director Lessa Bouchard — has decided that the ghosts should occasionally become substantial, step forward out of their ghostly light, and sit down alongside Max. To accommodate this, the ghost actors must take hold of the edge of the scrim, unfasten the velcro that holds it taut in its frame ("Skrrrrrrrik!"), shove it aside and step through. (At the end of one scene, poor Kolchinsky is even required to step back over the sagging scrim and reattach the velcro behind her before she can "mysteriously" vanish.) This, for the record, is the special effect that nearly ruins the final encounter between Max and her mother.

Despite a few examples of unsatisfactory problem-solving, "Tongue of a Bird" is an interesting and moving piece of theater. One assumes that the actors will become more comfortable with the text as the run goes on, and that McLaughlin's poetry will sound more natural. No amount of repetition, however, will make the velcro scrim anything

less than monumentally distracting. Audiences should ignore it as best they can and pray that Bouchard and Boles will find a different solution before the show closes.

**What: "Tongue of a Bird," a play presented by Dragon Productions**

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

**When: Thursday-Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m., through June 19**

**Cost: \$25 general admission, \$18 for students and seniors**

**Info: Go to <http://dragonproductions.net> ; for box-office help at any time, call 800-838-3006.**