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Here comes the rain again

Life is a vicious cycle in Dragon's 'When the Rain Stops Falling'

by Karla Kane / Palo Alto Weekly

Those who don't study history, as the adage goes, are doomed to repeat it. This is the case for the characters in Andrew Bovell's play, "When the Rain Stops Falling," who enact and re-enact their scenes of domestic drama across four generations and several continents. Sons inherit the emotional burdens of their fathers and grandfathers; mothers and daughters are permanently scarred by their pasts; and everyone's trapped in the tangled branches of their family trees. Life, it seems, is a loop; a broken record; or at least a song with repeating motifs. Dragon Productions Theatre Company offers a strong, compelling production of this dreamy, lyrical saga.

Bovell's play, sensitively directed at the Dragon by Kimberly Mohne Hill, is structured like a live-action puzzle, with the audience slowly putting together the pieces over the course of its two acts. Rather than a plot that unfolds linearly, or even in flashbacks (which implies sudden changes from present to past), "When the Rain Stops Falling" is a constant flowing between time periods and settings, with characters from different eras even sharing the stage at times, like ghosts or faded memories. The 1960s London melds into the 1980s London, which becomes the Australia of 2013, then 1971, and sometimes all the way up to 2039, and so on. The time changes happen often, but subtle projections onto the stage (set design by Daniel Stahlnecker) always keep the audience informed of the place and date.

To describe too many details of the story would spoil the way it intricately unfolds on stage, so I'll be vague. Some actors portray several characters across different time periods, while some characters are instead portrayed by multiple actors. Those encountered include a melancholy, yet hopeful, young vegetarian Englishman (Felix Abidor) searching for his long-lost father, who may or may not have vanished into the Australian outback years earlier; a kindly man (John Baldwin) driven to his wit's end after 25 years with his beloved but emotionally unavailable and increasingly unhinged-from-reality wife, whose life he long ago saved; a brilliant British woman feeling trapped by unplanned motherhood and an unraveling marriage (Lauren Hayes); and an Aussie girl desperate to escape the



Felix Abidor plays Gabriel Law, an Englishman searching for his long-lost father, in "When the Rain Stops Falling." Photo by Kimberlee Wittlieb.

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tragedies of her past (Maria Giere Marquis).

Throughout the play, bits of dialogue and movements are repeated, sometimes verbatim and sometimes with a twist, creating a rhythmic sense of déjà vu. One character laments the cruelty of parents, while her future self says the same of children. Over and over, we hear the characters discuss the relentless rain and the hypothetical people who have it much worse off, see them offering each other fish soup (it's supposedly very good for the brain) and watch them pick up hats, open and close umbrellas, and repeat the mistakes of their forefathers or former selves. A seemingly insignificant reference to a bit of old French philosophy in the first act is beautifully exemplified in the second. In this show, it seems, no moment, no matter how small, is insignificant.

There's also an environmental aspect to Bovell's work, as evidenced by the title. Climate change is alluded to, especially in the world of 2039, where species have become extinct and massive flooding is leading to unprecedented global destruction. It may be, one character states, the end of the world, fulfilling a prophecy from years before about fish falling from the sky. As younger generations inherit the burdens of their ancestors, so too does the planet's future suffer from humanity's impact.

But weather patterns, too, are cyclical, Bovell reminds us, as another character constantly fixates over great environmental disasters of the past, such as a devastating Caribbean storm and the "year without a summer."

Important for a play such as this, where things could get confusing in the wrong hands, the seven-member cast is able to make each character stand out -- these poor souls who often seem under a curse of fate, as if they've stepped out of a Shakespeare or classical Greek drama. Baldwin is heartbreaking as a good man who deserved better than he's received, as is Marquis as Gabrielle, who's gone through unspeakable tragedy at least thrice by the tender age of 24. And Judith Miller excels as a woman who's too haunted by a dark secret to allow herself to connect.

The accents prove tricky for some, but Baldwin, Ellam and Marquis sound fairly believable as Aussies, while Hayes and Miller do well with their cut-glass, posh British tones.

The Dragon cast and crew does a great job spinning this complicated, riveting web, which explores the patterns that make up life on Earth on both macro and micro levels. Though dark and gloomy as the oft-discussed weather, it's a play audiences won't soon forget.

What: "When the Rain Stops Falling"

Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City

When: Through May 29, Thursday-Saturday at 8 p.m.; Sundays at 2 p.m.

Cost: Tickets are \$30 admission/\$25 for students and seniors.

Info: Go to [Dragon Theatre](#).

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