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When the Rain Stops Falling

Dragon Productions Theatre Company

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A fish falls from the sky in the middle of an unrelenting rainstorm in a city surrounded by desert. A man screams and picks it up. It will take us two hours watching four generations of two families on two continents over a period of seventy-five years to discover what miracle has occurred in this scene of 2039. Epic in scope of time, place, and theme but intimate in focus on individual pain, loss, and loneliness, *When the Rain Stops Falling* is Australian playwright Andrew Bovell's 2010 complex, multi-layered family saga proclaimed by Time Magazine as Best New Play of the Year and winner of several Lucille Lortel awards.

A play that raises multiple questions about how much the traits, tendencies, and sins of past generations are passed on to future generations is also one that explores the hurt of parental abandonment and parental ignoring, issues of abuse of children and climate, and the power of seeking closure to aches so deep that the scars last generations. On its small stage, Dragon Productions Theatre Company tackles the mammoth task of linking these thick and troubling threads across multiple and crisscrossing time periods, family groupings, generations, and locations. The result is admirable and moving, if sometimes a bit confusing.

In his shabby, thread-bare suit and tattered tie, Gabriel York (the screaming man with the falling fish) nervously awaits in his small apartment in Alice Springs, Australia for the luncheon visit of a son not seen in twenty years, when the boy was seven. As YOrk, Evan Sokol is wide-eyed and visibly fearful as he relates in a strikingly emotionless voice the hesitations and preparations for such a visit. Even as he speaks, the father he never knew moves silently into the room as a young man coming to see his mother (York's grandmother) in a scene that now comes to fore some fifty years earlier—of another son who also never knew his father.



Felix Abidor

Photo by Kimberlee Wietlieb

Three generations flash in and out, with father-abandoned sons and mothers who refuse to tell them anything about their fathers and who—at least in one case—withhold the motherly love of a son not wanted. Secrets lay buried deep. Reasons for quick paternal splits bleed into another family's tragic history of a car accident, parental suicides, and child murder. The final link and the possible halt of sins passing through the generations falls on the brave, determined shoulders of young Andrew Price, the son that Gabriel York now awaits in 2039.

The twenty or so scenes that leap-frog back and forth over a half-dozen specific years in this three-quarter century timeline of two family trees are filled with symbolism of mimed actions and spoken lines underlining how much we carry and repeat our past within us. Characters enter the room in the same manner, making likened stops before an unseen mirror and looking out of a tilted window to some dreary, rainy scene. A simple soup of fish graces each disparate time and location's table. We hear the same jokes, references, and phrases again and again. As one dying wife says to a husband, "There are parts of me you have never known," and we realize this is a line appropriate for many of the child-parent or husband-wife combinations parading before us. One mother says to a son, "These things, these moments, slip away ... You realize you have so little to say to your children," and another son eerily echoes decades later, "You reach a moment in your life you have nothing to say to your parents." And outside, the rains continue, coastlines and fish disappear, and past generations' sins of environmental abuse come home to roost.

The silent yet powerful links between generations is accentuated by the casting of the play. Evan Sokol is not only the awaiting father in 2039, he is also Gabriel York's grandfather, Henry Law, a nervous, creepy sort we first meet in his and his wife's 1959 London flat. This Henry harbors secret, abhorrent desires that, once discovered by his wife Elizabeth, send him on an escape to Australia, never to see his then five-year-old son Gabriel Law again. Lauren Hayes is this Younger Elizabeth whose properly falling pearls, wrinkle-free blue dress, and steely, sad eyes meld later into an Older Elizabeth (Judith Miller), who frustrates her now-grown son Gabriel Law with her silence about his dad, her unwillingness to show him outward love, and her dependence on the ever-present bottle of wine.

Felix Abidor is both the visiting Andrew Price of 2039 and his twenty-something, handsome grandfather Gabriel Law, the exasperated son of Elizabeth whom we have already met. With a mother who will not breathe a word about his disappeared father, Gabriel leaves in 1988 for Australia to retrace steps recounted in the seven postcards Henry Law sent him (but ones he never received as a boy due to his mother hiding them).

Gabriel's journey takes him to a roadside inn in the remote coastal Coorong region, where he meets the beautiful Gabrielle York. The two who share first names soon share an evening of lovemaking that will eventually link these two family trees. Maria Giere Marquis is the hauntingly mysterious Gabrielle, who slowly loosens her shell and spills her own family secrets and tragedies as the heat between her and Gabriel turns up. Earlier connections between their two families become suddenly clear to her, leading to yet more woe and the introduction of a man who becomes her husband, Joe Ryan (a folksy, mild-mannered John Baldwin). In their later relationship, when she is now suffering from dementia, Sheila Ellam plays with touching honesty and pain the Older Gabrielle.

Director Kimberly Mohne Hill does her best to help us keep these many interlocking pieces un-jumbled, including allowing over-lapping Gabrielles and Elizabeths to watch in often emotionally packed silence as they remember past scenes of their younger selves with husbands now gone. Tears come to their eyes as remorse builds visibly for things that they know have impacted in damaging ways them and their offspring. The director's sensitive touches are evident throughout, but especially when generations join silently at the same table, finally revealing to each other and passing silently to the present generation memories long held unshared.

Daniel Stahlnecker's simple stage design and Beth Covey-Snedegar's properties work on many levels in the intimate Dragon setting to tell a story of family histories half-known and little told but symbolically and in personal impact powerfully connected. While Dan Garret's lighting establishes changing moods and settings, the Dragon sound system does not allow Ryan Short's sound design plans to work all that well. Thunder is less than convincing, and the ongoing sounds of rains are largely static in nature.

This is a play in which the audience needs to endure some of the confusions of act one in order to reap rich payoffs in act two, when the family trees finally take root and the interlocking branches become clearer. Andrew Bovell's script—seemingly so full of inevitable family and environmental doom—has just enough final moments of hope so that, upon leaving, there is a collective audience sigh that resolution and redemption of both families and their flooded world may be in sight. Dragon Productions Theatre Company is to be congratulated for grappling with the difficult but thought-provoking subjects of this complex play and for bringing *When the Rain Stops Falling* to its audience.

When the Rain Stops Falling continues through May 29, 2016, at Dragon Productions Theatre Company, 2120 Broadway Street, Redwood City, CA. Tickets are available online at dragonproductions.net or by calling 650-493-2006.

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