



FAIRBANKS

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Strong acting, set enhance emotional play

By Rober Hannon

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What struck me as I watched “How I Learned to Drive,” playing at Theatre UAF, was how the play neatly fuses classical and contemporary elements. The Greeks never considered their tragic figures in isolation. As Agamemnon, Oedipus and Medea thrashed against their natures and fates they wreaked havoc on more than themselves; generations and communities were stained by the consequences of their actions.

In a similar vein, Paula Vogel’s Pulitzer Prize winning work tackles the subject of sexual abuse, showing how one generation imposes this shameful legacy on the next. Vogel consciously acknowledges her debt to the Greeks by employing a “Greek chorus” that acts as a foil for the main action.

But what distances Vogel from, say, Aeschylus is her perfectly pitched ironic tone. Despite its heavy theme “How I Learned to Drive” approaches its subject lightly with wry commentary and sharply drawn often comical scenes.

Vogel achieves this balance between the light and ponderous through the voice of her main character, Li’l Bit. We meet Li’l Bit as an adult at the play’s start. Through flashbacks she guides us through the tangled instances that led to her violation and its aftermath.

To succeed, the play needs a strong actor at the center and Katie Sousa as Li’l Bit rises to the challenge. She does a remarkable job of shifting between adulthood and youth. With a few sure gestures, like the rocking of legs as she sits at a chair, or a slight vocal inflection, Sousa subtly moves from age to age and transitions between credulity, suspicion, cynicism and a rainbow of other emotional hues.

Sousa’s performance is matched by Andrew Cassel as the abuser, Uncle Peck. Vogel conceives Peck as manipulative, creepy yet sympathetic. It is a very tough juggling act. Nevertheless, Cassel and Sousa play off each other well. Still, given the play’s disturbing nature, I suspect not everyone will find Uncle Peck sympathetic, especially since he uses sympathy as a tool for manipulation.

Sousa and Cassel are supported by a trio of fine cast members. Hadassah R. Nelson, Claire Wool and Sergio Santana function as the Greek Chorus, commenting verbally or physically to the action. They also step into certain scenes as characters. All of them adopt various guises with assurance. Nelson especially delivers a palpably realized performance as Li’l Bit’s mother.

Director Carrie Baker has conceived and executed an elegantly lean but forceful piece of theater. The seating and performance space have been reconfigured to maximize the intimacy between performers and audience. Scenes are suggested with a few essential furniture pieces, minimizing the distraction of set changes. There is no intermission. All of these choices maximize the production’s emotional intensity. There is no escape for us as audience, just as there is no escape from the violation of abuse. Parents of children or adults sensitive to this subject will want to ponder whether the material is suitable.

In her notes Carrie Baker writes about the forgiveness Li’l Bit eventually achieves toward her abusive Uncle. Both Baker and playwright Vogel want to humanize victim and victimizer. In this they continue another venerable theatrical tradition. The Ancient Roman playwright Terence wrote: “I am human, so nothing human is alien to me.” Theatre UAF’s fine production will provoke much thought and discussion about what it means to be human.