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5:15 a.m. May 12, 2005

Complicated characters populate "How I Learned to Drive"

By Russ Bickerstaff

The stage is set with precious little in the form of furniture or props. Slide images flash on a single white screen providing a meta-symbolic rear-view mirror of the drama and comedy in the actions and reactions of three actors and a number of characters. Events tumble out onto the stage of the Sunset Playhouse's Studio Theatre with no respect to chronological order, which is precisely how playwright Paula Vogel envisioned the story unfolding in, "How I Learned to Drive."



The story is set in Maryland at various points in the 1960s through the 1980s. A girl everyone calls Li'l Bit (Amy Booth) is dealing with the upsetting changes in her body as she matures. The first to physically develop in her class, her changing body generates too much unwanted attention from her classmates and she seems to have little escape from it. Even at home, her lower-class rural family is a bit insensitive to her need for privacy on the issue.

The only one who seems even a bit sympathetic is her Uncle Peck (Brian Faracy) who is teaching her to drive. Peck's interest in her proves to be quite incestuous and unhealthy. Wandering dangerously close to being a paper-thin public service announcement about sexual abuse, the story avoids tragic cliché altogether with impressively complex plot elements which makes for an interesting journey into the provocative psychology of sex, love and change.

Vogel's characters are all a bit more complicated than they seem at first. Under the direction of Howard Bashinski with Kopper Bear Productions, the cast conveys this complexity with excellent form. As Li'l Bit, Amy Booth (who is also the company manager at First Stage Children's Theatre) is stunning as a woman narrating a story about her past, which jumps around to many different points in time. After a bit of initial stiffness opening night, she

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jumped gracefully through uncanny portrayals of the same girl at distinctly different ages in childhood and adolescence.

Judging from her performance, Booth is a very astute observer of behavior in childhood, as the innocence of childhood and the confusion of adolescence don't seem at all forced in her. The intricacies of her role are particularly important, as Li'l Bit clearly has feelings of love for Peck that would come across as poorly-conceived with anything less than a thoroughly inspired performance.

For his part, Brian Faracy plays Peck with enough depth to keep him from coming across as pure evil. The challenges of making someone everyone knows as a manipulative, sexually abusive uncle seem likable, however, would test the skills of any actor. Farracy isn't offered much help by playwright Paula Vogel. However, even in a scene with as much psychologically loaded symbolism as a monologue to a boy about the importance of fishing, Faracy manages to be charmingly benevolent.

The rest of the cast consists of Kristen Busalacchi, Matthew Huebsch and Sophia Dhaliwal as an array of other characters who all have a mixed bag of other supporting roles to play. They all have their individually captivating moments, but Dhaliwal comes off with the most memorable as Li'l Bit's mother. She delivers "a mother's guide to social drinking," with considerable flair.

The only significant problem with the rest of the cast was that they all appeared to be roughly the same age. Uniform apparent age and understated costuming made it difficult to tell who was exactly which relation to Li'l Bit in larger family scenes. In the confusion, the relatively convincing illusion of the small stage sags a bit in those scenes because of it.

Thematic slides of road signs and other visuals flash by on a screen above all the action onstage. With few notable exceptions, most of the slides were created by scenic designer J. Michael Griggs for an American Repertory Theater production of the play in 1998. While they were probably quite effective in that production, they seem a bit out of synch at the Sunset's black box theatre.

Griggs' stage design for the American Repertory Theater production featured a huge surface the size of a small movie screen to flash slides onto, providing a rich backdrop for the action. Here at the Sunset playhouse, the much smaller screen above the actors averts the eye from the stage, which can cause an annoying distraction from the action. Thankfully, the cast performs such an interesting multi-layered performance that it would be really unfortunate to lose focus. Just remember to keep your eyes on the road.

Paula Vogel's, "How I Learned To Drive," plays now through May 21 with Kopper Bear Productions at the Sunset Playhouse in Elm Grove. Tickets are \$16 and can be purchased by calling (262) 782-4430.



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