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Rites of passage mixed in intimate production

'How I Learned to Drive'
humanizes complicated issues

By JULIE McHALE - TimeOut Theater Critic

May 11, 2003

Paula Vogel often writes of edgy topics.

In "How I Learned to Drive," she deals with the taboo reality of pedophilia, not in a sensational way, as it is often reported in the news, but in a human way. She also touches upon incest, an even more forbidden topic.

We certainly do not condone these behaviors, but we begin to understand how either can happen a little better. In the production running at Sunset Playhouse's Studio Theater, we see that both parties can be victims and maybe both can be partially responsible, though the heavier onus is certainly on the adult.

The two main characters are Li'l Bit and her Uncle Peck. They have always had a special relationship. Peck is attracted to her and enjoys her company, and she is flattered by his attentions.

As is true of many children, Li'l Bit's sex education is deficient. She is also a product of a culture that sexualizes women at an early age. She is confused, she is hungry for someone who understands and values her. Uncle Peck fills that role.

Driving is almost a puberty rite in our culture. The invention of the automobile also greatly changed sexual behaviors. Getting a license represents a major step toward freedom and adulthood. Unfortunately, the responsibility placed upon the young person who receives this privilege is not always realized until later, for some too late.

Uncle Peck's driving lessons become a metaphor for their interdependence as well as the means for Li'l Bit to eventually reject her uncle's advances. As a result of these lessons, Uncle Peck unwittingly, perhaps, also teaches her to take control of this powerful machine, the car, which could represent her own journey through life.

A trio of actors take multiple roles and do so with credibility and aplomb. Kristen Busalacchi, Sophia Dhaliwal and Matthew Huebsch all flesh out the story with many characters and

sometimes almost re-create a Greek chorus. Brian Faracy and Amy Booth as Uncle Peck and Li'l Bit are mesmerizing. Though we hate Uncle Peck's manipulative charm, we feel some sympathy for his dilemma. Booth displays amazing skill as the naive, flirtatious adolescent, who is conflicted and intrigued as to what is happening both to and within her. We are left horrified but better informed as to this mystifying phenomenon.

Vogel also has a habit of using humor as a contrasting device when she deals with the darker side of humanity. It is quite effective.

Overall the production, thanks to the skilled direction of Howard Bashinski, and a marvelous cast, is both stunning and disturbing.

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"How I Learned to Drive"

3.5 stars (out of four)

When: through Sunday

Where: Sunset Playhouse, Studio Theater, 800 Elm Grove Road, Elm Grove

Tickets: \$16

Call: (262) 782-4430