

Study of grief proves subtle, affecting and even funny

Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic

Thursday, May 24, 2007

Rabbit Hole: Drama.

By David Lindsay-Abaire. Directed by Kirsten Brandt. (Through June 10. San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. Two hours. Tickets: \$17.50-\$56. Call (408) 367-7255 or go to www.sjrep.com)

A videotape is erased. A child's toys are sorted and packed away. Sisters get on each other's nerves. A husband and wife struggle to communicate. Despite their best efforts to help each other, a mother and father, an aunt and a grandmother have to deal separately with the death of a child.

David Lindsay-Abaire's "Rabbit Hole" is one of those plays where nothing happens but a great deal transpires. The action is minimal. The plot doesn't really progress. What Lindsay-Abaire gives us is an exploration of grief embodied in three-dimensional, smart, sympathetic, contemporary people with fully developed senses of humor. In Kirsten Brandt's expert staging, which opened Friday at San Jose Repertory Theatre, realistically understated emotions, comic touches and a stunning, multilayered performance by Stacy Ross make for a deeply affecting drama.

It isn't exactly a fashionable play to like, given the disgruntlement generated when the Pulitzer Prize board overruled its drama jury's recommendations to award "Rabbit" this year's prize. Its cinematic realism (Nicole Kidman has purchased the film rights) can seem like an artistic cop-out after the wildly surrealistic comic and poignant turns of Lindsay-Abaire's breakthrough "Fuddy Meers" and subsequent "Kimberly Akimbo." But it's bracingly bold in confronting the aftermath of any parent's worst nightmare, and, for the most part, riveting as seen at San Jose Rep.

Becca (Ross) and Howie (Andy Murray) are an upscale suburban couple -- as deftly conveyed by Kate Edmunds' tasteful living room and kitchen set and B. Modern's attractive costumes -- whose 4-year-old son, Danny, was killed when he ran in front of a car. The play opens eight months later. Becca and Howie are still trying to recover -- as individuals and, in beautifully rendered appeasements and confrontations, as a couple.

Lindsay-Abaire eases us into the situation, opening with a cleverly comic scene between Becca and her sister Izzy (Jessa Watson), the family's party-hearty bad girl to Becca's practical, "perfect" elder daughter. Watson is a delightfully selfish and immature Izzy, only semiconscious of the effect of the story she's telling, as one outrageous revelation leads to another. Only an undertone of eggshell-thin fragility beneath Ross' sisterly affection, disapproval and forced reassurances conveys the pain she's wrestling with as she folds a pile of little boy's clothes.

Murray and Ross are beautifully matched in their intricate, deeply touching dance of emotional engagement and avoidance. His forthright, engaged, lost Howie is a take-charge man desperately trying to cope with a grief he can't comprehend. Her equally strong Becca is more defensively private in her mourning and more eloquently revealing in the nuances that betray her turmoil. Even her satiric barbs about would-be comforters are as painful as they are funny. The depth of their mutual affection makes their inept attempts to share their pain all the more affecting.

Lynne Soffer, as Becca's somewhat underwritten colorful mom, has some trouble pulling off a problematic comic rant about the Kennedys, but is strikingly effective in a fraught conversation about long-term grief with Ross. James Breedlove is poignantly awkward, uneasy and earnest as the high school senior trying to make amends for having accidentally killed the child.

In many respects, "Rabbit" is more a meditation on incalculable loss than a full-fledged drama. But it's for the most part well crafted, building its emotional impact by careful degrees. Brandt orchestrates the action to keep its sentiment carefully at bay as Ross gently, evocatively and expertly wrings our hearts in a tour de force of deeply felt bereavement.

E-mail Robert Hurwitt at rhurwitt@sfnchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/05/24/DDGS0PVS7R1.DTL>

This article appeared on page E - 4 of the San Francisco Chronicle