

Northern Stage's 'Venus Rising' Powerful, Challenging...and Funny

Theater Review

| FEBRUARY 07, 2019

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Northern Stage's current world premier production of "Venus Rising" is a love story. It's also a tale of drug use and abuse, and the struggles of aging. It's a comedy brought to life by four very talented actors on a fantastic set with creative, strong direction. First and foremost, though, it is a script that elevates and examines human behavior, celebrating each person's existence while not shying away from their foibles. By evening's end, you walk away entertained, enriched, and challenged at the same time.

We first meet Cora slumped in her recliner, armed with Kleenex, surrounded by the detritus of aging, including her bottle of sweet wine. Diane Findlay gives us a convincing portrayal of a woman besieged with arthritis, but with a lively spirit and sharp intellect.

Then, the kitchen door opens and a middle-aged woman enters the house, dragging two suitcases. It's Julie, Cora's daughter, and her unexpected arrival is due to her sudden decision to leave her husband and their tired relationship. Laurel Casillo wastes no time trying to take control, alarmed at the contents of Mom's refrigerator. Mom insists all is well: "I had Slim-Fast and a popsicle for dinner."

In the next scene, Cora is a different human being. She enters in a nice dress, make-up, and with a senior bounce in her step. She credits it to the ebb and flow of arthritis, but Julie soon learns that Cora has a gentleman friend, Winslow, a retired chemistry professor.

The highest hilarity of the evening came while watching Julie wrestle with the concept that her aged mother is in the midst of a relationship and all that entails. Playwright Marisa Smith of Hanover gives us hysterical moments surrounding the realization that sex is a part of senior relationships, and Cora's total candor about how that works, as she explains it in some detail to Julie, and her shock and horrified reaction is hysterical.

Kenneth Kimmins plays the aged Adonis among the Venuses, portraying a gentle, supportive, mature human being, a character who belies Julie's worries that her mom is falling in love with someone out to take her estate.

The fourth character, Grace, is a recovering addict, and formerly Julie's closest childhood friend. According to the playwright, Grace was added to the script in its later stages, and what a marvelous decision that was. Actress Laurie Wells makes the character loud and large, someone who's been to hell and isn't going to waste any more of the days she has left.

The interplay between these four characters ranges from subtle to spirited, and gave me a much-needed lift by showing the potential of the human spirit in subtle and real ways.

No one could see this show without devoting much thought to the set. In between the proscenium, you have a beautifully detailed house's three rooms.

Each room is deliciously different, a library with statuary that would feel at home in a Princeton dining club, a kitchen straight out of the 1950s, and a living room that feels as if it arrived by truck from someone's aging home. It's visually delicious. But then, the proscenium itself is as mythic as the play's title. It's a painting that wraps three sides of the stage, probably 50-feet wide and 18-feet high.

Credit must be given to scenic designer Reid Thompson, and to change artist Melissa Robinson and scenic artist Diane Zimmerman for the painting.

It is a genuine privilege to be one of the first to see a significant new show with elegant twists and turns. My wife Becky noted that the two characters who first appear to have the best reasons to be broken people actually turn out to be the strongest. Circumstances and stereotypes don't always predict reality. And Northern Stage has proven that one theater in small-town Vermont can be a significant player in bringing quality new theater to the stage, both here and in New York. Go see this show for yourself. It's better than this review.

"Venus Rising" runs through February 17, with shows every day except Monday. Go to northernstage.org for a complete schedule, including matinee performances. Tickets may also be reserved by calling 296- 7000.