

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Cake Rises, Partway

Sylvie · Wednesday, August 2nd, 2017

Sometimes you get lucky.

This happens when events beyond your control unexpectedly slide into your orbit with an altogether wondrous effect. Which is pretty much what happened when playwright Bekah Brunstetter got an idea for a play about a bake shop whose deeply religious owner is asked to bake a wedding cake for a gay couple — at a time when the politics of the day were buzzing with cases of similar real-life situations.

But Brunstetter, a successful TV producer and writer (NBC's *This Is Us* and Starz's *American Gods*), went a step further in her play, *The Cake*. Della, the baker, has known and cherished the young woman who's about to be married since she was a baby. So imagine her consternation when she discovers that this beautiful child she so adores is about to marry... a woman.

That's the situation, a little complicated and very perplexing.



Debra Jo Rupp in *The Cake*.

In a *New York Times* interview, Brunstetter said she had been working on the idea for this piece since 2015. It gained traction when the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear the case of Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission — a 2012 case involving a baker who refused to make a wedding cake for a gay couple. Brunstetter, who grew up in a devout and happy Southern Baptist family in Winston-Salem, makes no bones about feeling caught in the middle — with an enduring appreciation for the warm Christian embrace she knew as a child and still enjoys, and the gay perspective that she has grown to appreciate as a straight adult.

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This understanding of both sides of such a hot-button issue has served her well. *The Cake* was greeted at Atwater Village's Echo Theater with so much attention and praise when it opened earlier this summer that its sold-out run was recently extended. The writing is accessible and engaging, if also manipulative. The production benefits greatly from the solid talent of its small cast wherein the tone is set by sweet-natured Della (played with down-to-earth humor and tenderness by the fine Debra Jo Rupp, of TV's *That '70s Show*). The warmth of that central performance keeps the production humming and honest — essential ingredients if this *Cake* is to rise. And rise it does, if

not quite to the heights desired.



l-r, Carolyn Ratteray and Shannon Lucio in *The Cake*.

Brunstetter mostly gives the benevolent denizens in this fictitiously re-invented Christian enclave of Winston-Salem their due, starting with the bride, object of Della's deep affection, the beautiful and gentle Jen, child of one of her deceased best friends (played with just the right amount of emotion by a lovely Shannon Lucio). But it is Carolyn Ratteray as Macy, Jen's betrothed lover, who has the trickier and more challenging task of showing us how she and Jen fell in love and why that love became more than a passing fancy.

Macy is on trial here. All eyes should be on her because hers is the true central role, except that it has not been built up that way. Ratteray has to display her friendly, slightly masculine side, but also her awareness that she's the nemesis in Della's eyes. How will she win her over? How will she reveal herself in the process, without somehow overcompensating? Ratteray's performance is a risky balancing act, but also a tough call because the writing hasn't provided the tools with which to flesh all this out.

Commendable in its inclusivity and its desire to tackle a philosophically complex issue, the script leaves something of a vacuum under the craft and lilt of the comedy. It's just a short level up from sitcom, while our own overexposure to the real-life situations probably doesn't help. We watch passively, but we do not fully engage. The conflict is so benignly and explicitly acted out for us, that our emotions are not invited to assist.

The balance of the cast includes the voice of Morrison Keddie as the host of *The Great American Baking Show* — modeled on the English one — that Della would give three fingers of her right hand to win. It's an interpolated theme designed to endear Della and tell us more about her. A pleasant distraction, but a distraction nonetheless.



Joe Hart and Debra Jo Rupp in *The Cake*.

The other important character in this little group is Della's husband. Theirs is an old marriage in the very best sense. They are close, share well and understand most of each other's needs. Actor Joe Hart delivers a sober amalgam of old shoe and attentive partner, as he discerns that Della really is in trouble and would love his help. When she asks him a leading and slightly embarrassing question, he finds a quaintly amusing way to comply and shake her out of her dilemma.

Peter Hickock's three-location set serves the play well enough, although the bakeshop could use a few more bright props to make it as alluring as this baker's dedication to the art. The lighting by Pablo Santiago is straightforward, as is Jennifer Chambers' invisible direction — which is a compliment, not an objection.

But this *Cake* demands a more basically searching effort and it will get four opportunities to find it, since it is scheduled to be staged at Playmakers Repertory Company in Chapel Hill, NC in September; the Warehouse Theatre in Greenville, SC in December; the La Jolla Playhouse in February, and Houston's Alley Theater in June.

Brunstetter has the energy, craft, ambition and sensitivity of a gifted writer. So this is unfinished business that begs for greater complexity than words alone provide. It wants multi-dimensional characters. And it wants them big, muddled and anguished enough to make not just a ripple in the sand, but a tsunami in the heart.

Top image: l-r, Debra Jo Rupp and Shannon Lucio in The Cake at the Echo Theater Company.

Photos by Darrett Sanders.

WHAT: *The Cake*

WHERE: Echo Theater Company at Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90039.

WHEN: Wednesday, 8pm, Aug. 9; Thursdays, 8pm, today & Aug.10; Fridays, 8pm, Aug. 4 & 11; Saturdays, 8pm, Aug. 5 & 12; Sundays, 4pm, Aug. 6 & 13. Ends Aug. 13.

HOW: tickets, \$40, available at www.EchoTheaterCompany.com or 310.307.3753.

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A MELANCHOLY FOOTNOTE

Monday brought the very sad news that Sam Shepard had died at his Kentucky home on July 27 at the age of 73. He succumbed to Lou Gehrig's disease or ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis).

I had interviewed Shepard for the *Los Angeles Times* in the 1970s, before the opening of his play, *The Tooth of Crime*, at the Mark Taper Forum, if I recall correctly. What I remember clearly is what a charmer he was — fun, whimsical and a little shy, riding a nice wave of growing recognition at the time. We reconnected on only one other occasion, when one of his plays was being developed at San Francisco's Magic Theatre in that same decade, and a group of us had taken a break for a lively, noisy lunch at some neighborhood joint — Sam, the artistic director and a few other people, including me. Those were the happily anointed days when Shepard was in the limelight, brimming with youth and creativity.



Sam Shepard

It was impossible to not be smitten with *that* Sam Shepard — a mischievous, vigorous man with a great smile and sense of humor. So much so, that when my husband would call me at *The Times* and my phone happened to be busy, he would instruct the operator (we had live operators then) to tell me that “Sam Shepard called.” It was a private joke that we shared and giggled over for a few years.

In the decades since, Shepard wrote many more plays, screenplays, books and went on to act in ever so many films. He became quotable, yet increasingly elusive, a determined maverick, even as other life events and alcohol began to gain on him.

Nobody can begrudge him the recent too-early departure. Lou Gehrig's is a merciless disease and no one deserves to live with it beyond a certain unendurable point. The man will be deeply missed,

but the plays, the words, the memories and the vision of that rugged, dimpled grin will not disappear. Not as long as at least one person is left behind to remember it.

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