

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Marjorie Prime Not Quite Ready for Prime Time

Sylvie · Wednesday, October 1st, 2014

While the subject and ambition of Jordan Harrison's *Marjorie Prime* must have seemed worth the undertaking, the production now at the Mark Taper Forum is mostly confusing. It is a difficult piece to write about, since ideally the goal appears to be that the smoke-and-mirrors plot should be discovered in the playing. However, the structure Harrison has chosen makes that goal difficult to achieve.

What we experience is a play about an unspecified time when “primes,” robotic creations mimicking human beings and made to look like specific individuals (alive or dead), might be developed to help people with dementia or Alzheimer's Disease. The idea is that the patients might survive their illness better if they could share time with people they were close to (alive or dead) and whom they might recognize and enjoy — even if those “people” are only primes.

What we learn about life events in this family comes through oblique conversation, including a son's suicide, the importance of a pet dog named Tony and the ramifications that attach themselves to the turbulence that follows. Not a bad idea for a play and certainly not without ambition, but the absence of clarity, no matter how deliberate and intentional, scuttles the end result. The audience has to spend too much time figuring out what is going on, who is a prime and who is not, who is alive and who is dead, and when and where it is at any given moment. All of this delivered with a gravitas that the production does not earn.



Lois Smith and Frank Wood in the world premiere of Jordan Harrison's MARJORIE PRIME

Frustration also derives from pedestrian dialogue that tells us less than we need to know. It shrinks the writing down to a play about family secrets as we learn more about Marjorie (Lois Smith), her deceased husband Walter (Jeff Ward), her angry daughter Tess (Lisa Emery) and her ever-patient son-in-law Jon (Frank Wood) as they try to cope with family baggage, each other and Marjorie's failing memory. All are ill-served by the metaphoric conceit, not to say metaphysical approach to a situation ultimately rooted in an all too painful and mundane reality.

The almost reverential direction by Les Waters does nothing to quicken the pace or liven the action. Lois Smith has engaging moments as the funny and outspoken Marjorie, in denial about her condition, yet blunt and frank about her life and her relatives. But the time games are frustrating. The only conflict we experience — and then only mildly — is between mother and daughter, plus a less troubled one between Tess and her husband, the ever-patient and understanding Jon. Even a memory play needs tangier spice than that.

The actors do a decent job as directed, but the play's aspirations are no match for situations that feel dreary and make a very light impression. An audience should not have to work so hard for so little reward.

WHAT: *Marjorie Prime*

WHERE: The Mark Taper Forum at the Downtown Music Center

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays 8pm; Saturdays 2:30 & 8pm; Sundays 1 & 6:30pm. Through October 19

HOW: Tickets \$25-\$70, available at The Mark Taper box office or 213.628.2772 or at www.centertheatregroup.org

Top image: (l-r) Lisa Emery and Lois Smith in MARJORIE PRIME. All photos by Craig Schwartz

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