

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Of Good Stock Could Be a Lot Better

Sylvie · Wednesday, April 8th, 2015

Plays about dysfunctional families seem to be an American specialty. I wonder why. We've had the O'Neill tragedies, the A.R. Gurney drawing-room (and dining room) exchanges, the bitter-herb Edward Albees, the crazily skewed Chris Durangs and the fangs of *August: Osage County*.

One could go on an on. It's a popular subject.

The other popular subject is sisters. And not just sister plays, but *three-sister* plays, from Beth Henley's bittersweet *Crimes of the Heart*, to Wendy Wasserstein's *Sisters Rosenzweig* to Chekhov's seminal *The Three Sisters* which started this whole ball rolling. (We also have King Lear's three infamous daughters, but they weren't American so they don't count here.)

Now comes Melissa Ross' *Of Good Stock*, a play commissioned by, and currently on stage at, South Coast Repertory (SCR). It is the most recent contemporary iteration of more or less the same idea. Don't yawn. This one will keep you wide awake, partly, alas, for the wrong reasons.

The three Stockton sisters are a New York tribe born of the nationally famous writer Mick Stockton, who was not a good father, and a Polish mother, who died of cancer too soon. Jess (Melanie Lora) is the eldest sister, to whom Dad chose to bequeath the enviable coastal Cape Cod house she now inhabits with her husband Fred (Rob Nagle). There's a birthday coming up and Jess, with some trepidation, has felt the need to invite her sisters, Amy (Kat Foster) and Celia (Andrea Sygłowski), to come celebrate it with her. They are welcome to bring along any companion *du jour*. And they do.

Jess is skittish. It seems she too has come down with cancer, and while she's not at death's door, it is one reason she wants to catch up with her mostly absent sisters. Celia has brought along a Montana boy, Hunter (Todd Lowe), the oldest undergraduate on the planet, whom she's known for only a couple of months but who — as she informs the stunned family — is the father of the child she's carrying. Amy, meanwhile, the middle sister, is deep into elaborate plans for her Tahiti wedding to a good-looking guy named Josh (Corey Brill) whom she's training for early emasculation.

It may all sound fairly ho-hum in the realm of dysfunction, but every play has its individual quirks, family plays mostly included, and the Ross script, while somewhat overwritten, is well calibrated and could be surprisingly touching. If one could not only hear, but also *register* enough of it.



l-r, Melanie Lora, Todd Lowe, Andrea Syglowski and Rob Nagle in *Of Good Stock*.

That may not happen at SCR which, if the performance I attended is a reliable measure, has been directed by Gaye Taylor Upchurch to play at breakneck speed and piercing decibel levels. These sisters, it seems, are incapable of coming together without jockeying for position and competing to see who can yell the loudest. Add to that a bad habit of continually overlapping conversation and it just about guarantees that you won't be able to follow much of what they're saying to each other either.

That appears to have been a directorial choice and it does a large disservice to the playwright, to say nothing of the audience. (Who is the performance for if not the audience...?) Might as well feel sorry for the talented actors, too, who are equally trapped in this tower of babble. The only one who consistently can make himself heard above the noise is Nagle, the booming timber of whose voice trumps all other sounds. I know the aim is to illustrate the extreme competition, differences and rivalry among the sisters, but surely not at the cost of incoherence. A more measured approach to achieving the same effect may be tricky, but it's absolutely essential and would be a lot less alienating.

In addition to that complaint is that of the now common — and seemingly constant — abuse of everyone's favorite four-letter word (not "love," but its variant) and you add insult to penury. Are there really no other words in the English language that might be less overworked and more effective as bludgeon? The jackhammering of that one strident syllable in an intentional exorcism of the familial poisons that infect these sisters becomes much more deadening than funny (as it is intended to be), because it is so overdone-on-purpose.



Rob Nagle and Melanie Lora in *Of Good Stock*.

The reality is that, bottom line, a great deal of talent exists in the writing as well as in the production, from the excellent actors to the lighting (Bradley King), sound (Darron L. West), costume (David Kay Mickelsen) and set design (Tony Fanning makes you feel the wet salt air of the Cape and the welcoming comfort of this house).

What the production needs now is some serious modulation. Everyone deserves it — from audiences above all, to performers to playwright.

Top image: l-r, Andrea Syglowski, Rob Nagle, Melanie Lora, Kat Foster & Corey Brill in Of Good Stock at SCR

All photos by Debora Robinson.

WHAT: *Of Good Stock*

WHEN: 7:30pm, Sundays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays; 8pm, Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays; 2:30pm, Saturdays & Sundays. Ends April 26. Note: there will be no evening performance on April 26.

WHERE: Segerstrom Stage, South Coast Repertory, 655 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa CA

92626.

HOW: Tickets, starting at \$22, are available on line at www.scr.org, or at 714.708.5555 or in person at the theatre box-office.

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