

CPTC's Night Mother Provides an Intense Night of Theater



Photo credit: Jason Talbot

The reputation of *Night Mother* by Marsha Norman is that it is intense. When I casually chatted with several local frequent theatergoers about going to see the show, they responded with some form of, "Wow, what a show." Without having much more than a brief plot summary, I wasn't sure if that was a good "wow" or a bad one. As it turns out, there is a third way someone can mean wow: to be left stunned and feeling both good and bad. Counter Production's undertaking of this stunning show took very difficult subject matter and delivered a top-notch experience with some of the finest acting and staging I have seen in the semi-professional realm.

All I knew of the show walking in was this: A mother and her grown daughter are cohabitating in the 1980s, and the daughter tells her mother she plans to kill herself that night. When I walked into the black box theater at AS220 I was welcomed directly into a small apartment set that was so detailed I spent several minutes silent while others chatted around me. I've worked as a properties manager before, so I know how much work goes into each individual item that makes it onto a set. This space was far from just a set, though, it was a recreation of artistic director Ted Clements' grandmother's home. There were dishes in the dryer by a real sink, salt and pepper on the table and a working clock on the wall. Every cabinet and drawer that was opened during the show was filled with the expected items in a real kitchen, and far from all of them were used. This attention to detail immediately made this production feel like I was looking in on a real moment between the two leading women.

The mother, Thelma, played by Becky Minard, is hard but sympathetic. She clearly has love for her daughter, but struggles to find the right words to say when faced with such a shocking conversation. Minard's performance was astounding. She seamlessly works through fear, anger, disappointment and confusion, giving each emotion its due. The way she pulls in the audience like they are with her in her desperation to talk her child out of this decision is masterful. I was particularly engaged in watching her face, as she does some very impressive and subtle acting just with her eyes. In a role that could so easily be played over-the-top, she was instead powerful and restrained, creating space for the audience to join her.

Daughter Jessie, portrayed by Audrey Lavin Crawley, is resolute from the moment she speaks her intentions aloud. Just as she tells her mother what she plans to do with her father's old gun, a soft

ticking of a clock can be heard. Lavin Crawley is grounded and willful and never turns to dramatics to get across her despair. She calmly fills jars with candy and cleans up around the apartment like she is within a normal evening with her mother. The calm that Lavin Crawley exhibits allows for the room to breathe and really listen; this performance is far from quiet, though, she is a force. At times I found myself understanding completely why she felt she should kill herself just as someone would explain why they chose anything in their life. This made the moments when Thelma came raging back against her plan so poignant.

The relationship director Valerie Remillard uncovered between these two women is remarkable. To somehow be rooting for both to get what they need in spite of them being very far apart is complex and expertly done. About taking on this show, Remillard said, "It was important to me that I didn't glorify the subject." She pointed out that in the '80s and even today in rural areas, there are not resources for people to turn to if they have feelings of wanting to end their own life. What happens when there is no help? Exploring this through theater is important, even if at times difficult. Sitting in that apartment with these characters at this exact moment in their lives is uncomfortable, but it is impossible to look away. Wanting to know what Thelma can say to stop Jessie from resorting to the worst case scenario becomes all-consuming. The ticking in the background clicks on and it feels like a race against the clock.

So does a play like this glorify suicide? I would say definitively, no. What it does instead is force its audience to look at the darkness, to go deep into the uncomfortable place that we have all wondered about and rarely explored. In going at this subject matter head-on, it shows the realities of it, and takes out all of the glorification. If I were to only hear this beautiful and harrowing script one time, Counter-Productions was the right place to do it, I can only call this performance one thing: flawless.

Night Mother runs through Nov 25 at Counter-Productions Theatre Company, AS220 Blackbox Theatre, 95 Empire St, PVD. For tickets, brownpapertickets.com