



Women, their common bonds and a lot of bridesmaid dresses are at the center of Theatre UAF's spring production

A kind of, somewhat, *maybe* good friend asks you to be in her wedding. You begrudgingly oblige. Now, you find yourself saddled among a group of acquaintances, all clothed in the same, horrible bridesmaid dresses. It's a life issue many women know all too well.

It's also the core of "Five Women Wearing the Same Dress," the play opening Friday at Lee H. Salisbury Theatre, directed by professor Carrie Baker and starring a slate of seasoned and up-and-coming university actors. Written in 1993 by screenwriter Alan Ball ("Six Feet Under," "True Blood," "American Beauty"), "Five Women" brings together the seemingly different bridesmaids who avoid the bride's wedding reception by hiding out in an upstairs bedroom of a lavish Knoxville, Tennessee, estate. As the reception progresses, the women realize they are more aligned than they thought as they discover their common bonds.

The production is Baker's seventh at UAF, with notable past projects being "Stop Kiss" in 2015, "Speech & Debate" in 2013, "How I Learned to Drive" in 2009 and "The Laramie Project" in 2008. "Five Women" is something of a departure for Baker, though. Typically drawn to heavier theatrical topics, "Five Women" is a strong comedy with a mostly female cast, something she said she wanted to explore.

"It's very funny," she said. "Alan Ball has a lot of TV credits, and it's sitcom in a way but it's not without its more dramatic, meaningful moments. I had a lot to take into consideration when I chose this script. As we started design meetings and cast rehearsals, sort of right around the Women's March in January, there is a lot more going on in this play than meets the eye, and that's been fun to discover. It's been great to have a female-heavy experience."

The bridesmaids themselves are as different as the actors bringing them to life. There is Meredith, the bride's wild and rebellious sister; Mindy, the bride's inept and out-and-proud lesbian sister; the "ugly sidekick" from high school and college, Georgeanne; Trisha, a good girl gone bad; and the devout and faithful Frances.

Freshman Sarah Williams of Wasilla is portraying Meredith, whom Williams called a rebel with a soft side whose complexities are discovered throughout the performance.

"She's angsty, she doesn't like her sister," Williams said. "She's into rock music and is anti-corporation. She's the classic goth girl. It was definitely a challenge but a lot of fun. Her character is so new to me as that's not how I am."

The production is a more thorough experience for Williams, who participated in theater during her years at Colony High School.

"Being a college show versus a high school show, it's awesome. It's a lot more serious than high school, and my high school was pretty intense. It's great having the female cast. It shows all our talent, and we express ourselves."

Jill Shipman, a doctoral student in volcanology who's a veteran actor at the university and in the Fairbanks theater world, is portraying Georgeanne, the bride's former sidekick with whom Georgeanne has fallen out of favor. Shipman described the role as brash and loud, something with which she can, at times, identify.

"It's great exploring new things and the character," Shipman said. "It's an overall comedy, and (Alan) Ball is trying to delve into the lives of these women, which are reflective of the times. It touches on some current events all wrapped in humor. Within the context of comedy, he's analyzing the issues of the day."

The play features one male — newcomer Jared Olin of Galena — but the female-centric cast shouldn't be a distraction to male viewers, Shipman said. If anything, the lessons the bridesmaids learn transcend gender and speak to all audiences.

"I have had a blast with this production," Shipman said. "I have really enjoyed developing my hot mess of a character Georgeanne and my relationships with the other women and one man in the play. The evolution from script to fully actualized play with a lovely set design, disastrously fantastic



Theatre UAF's production of "5 Women Wearing the Same Dress" by Alan Ball, Directed by Carrie Baker featuring (clockwise from top left) Brandi Larson, Sarah Williams, Jill Shipman, Meghan Fowler and Natilly Hovda.

Photo by Kade Mendelowitz

bridesmaids dresses and nostalgic music hits from the '90s has been a thrill to experience. I can't wait to share this show with our audiences. I think the play is hilarious but also touches on important life issues."

If You Go

What: "Five Women Wearing the Same Dress," written by Alan Ball, directed by Carrie Baker, produced by Theatre UAF

Where: Lee H. Salisbury Theatre, Fine Arts Complex, University of Alaska Fairbanks campus

When: 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays through April 2

Cost: If purchased online ahead of time at www.uaf.edu/theatrefilm, tickets are \$10 students; \$15 seniors, military and UAF; \$20 adults. Sunday matinees save \$2. For tickets purchased at the door, a \$2 service fee is added. Tickets also are available by calling the box office at 474-7751

FYI: The production should be considered rated R for adult language.

Cast

Sarah Williams — Meredith
Natilly Hovda — Frances
Brandi Larson — Mindy
Meghan Fowler — Trisha
Jill Shipman — Georgeanne
Jared Olin — Tripp