



FAIRBANKS

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The Drive for Compassion and Understanding

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By Glenn BurnSilver

“How I Learned to Drive” is a play about an inappropriate relationship between uncle and niece, but humor and the humanity of the two characters allows audience compassion.

On the surface, such compassion seems unlikely, especially when considering the relationship is between Uncle Peck and Li'l Bit, who was between 11 and 17 at the time. But playwright Paula Vogel, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1998 for this work, shapes the story and emotions through flashbacks, narration, monologues and occasional voice-overs. In this way, the audience discovers how the relationship flourished and floundered while the pair examined their love for each other.

“The relationship between Uncle Peck and Li'l Bit is actually quite complicated,” explained director Carrie Baker. “It’s a complex look at their relationship and not just a dark play about child molestation that condemns the abuser. My hope is that the audience is left feeling compassion for both of them and is challenged to look at this traumatic situation with a hopeful eye.”

The play opens with an adult Li'l Bit, played by Katie Sousa, addressing the audience. She speaks of her childhood and life before the setting shifts to a 17-year-old Li'l Bit sitting in a car with her uncle, who is teaching her how to drive. Baker said that even though the audience grasps that the relationship has been going on for a number of years, nothing inappropriate occurs.

“It’s actually all done with the two of them sitting out straight, not facing or talking to each other or touching. It’s all done with pantomime,” Baker said. “In

this way Vogel eases us into the play. If we saw him touch her in that first scene it would be hard to deal with. But she eases us in and then the relationship grows and we see there is love between them. By the end of the play we do see him touch her, but it’s a lot easier to take at that point.”

As Li'l Bit tells her story, both she and Uncle Peck remain exposed. Body language, whether sitting or standing, plays into every interaction. Much of this results from a minimal stage set. The “car” is two chairs. There is a sock hop, a kitchen table dining scene — “a million different scenes,” Baker said — all done with limited props accented by stage lighting and actor pantomime.

“We sort of melded the abstract with the real,” Baker explained. “The set sort of suggests a road, and off ramp and overpass, but with five chairs and a table we create all these different locations and isolate those locations with light. Especially with so many locations, I think it’s much more fluid to just take those chairs to the table and we’re off with the family dinner scene.”

Also on stage throughout the performance, three actors in the Greek chorus serve as family, narrator and commentator. Their roles are to introduce scenes, but also, through subtle gestures, alert audiences to telling moments in the story.

“Their function is to show what the family did or didn’t pick up on,” Baker said. “Their backs are turned a lot. Peck will say something inappropriate and the chorus will turn, and then turn back. There are hints that they (as in the family) knew what was going on, but nobody did anything. It subtly underscores the script,

but is not a big attention-puller.”

Baker, who last year directed “The Laramie Project,” said she chose this script to challenge people’s beliefs. As a mother with a 19-month-old son, Baker said, she is constantly thinking about teaching her child and the responsibility associated with those choices.

“I think about it in a daily way, a conscious way, and that has pushed me towards these kinds of scripts that ask our audience to examine our society, and perhaps even make changes in their lives,” she said.

By the end, Li'l Bit shows there is always hope and reconciliation.

“She’s looking back from a place where she’s survived, recovered, is OK and can laugh about it,” Baker said. “That device is her way of saying that she survived and is fine. She eventually forgives Uncle Peck.”



Photo by John Wagner