

ENTERTAINMENT

Theater Review | ‘Looking for Normal’ an absorbing production about gender identity



Irma (Kristin Brownstone) confronts her husband Roy (Jerry Lloyd) in the Actors' Theatre production of "Looking for Normal." (Jana Marcus — Contributed)

By **JOANNE ENGELHARDT** | joanneengelhardt@comcast.net | Santa Cruz Sentinel

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It's rather fascinating that the potent play, "Looking for Normal," is about the last place you'd look to find anything normal. That's because it's about a 45-year-old man, happily married for 25 years and a father of two, who suddenly announces to first, his pastor, and then, his flabbergasted wife, that he's been living in a woman's body all his life and now wants to begin the process of becoming one.

"Gender reassignment surgery" is actually the medical term for what Roy, a kind, gentle family man, wants to go through to the astonishment of just about every person in his life.

It's to Actors Theatre of Santa Cruz's credit that they chose to mount this insightful play, now running at Center Stage through April 28. Even better, they selected versatile Tandy Beal to direct it, and she chose actors who slip into their characters (with all their vulnerabilities and strengths) quite easily.

The fulcrum of "Normal" is, of course, Roy and, as played by Jerry Lloyd, he is a man who just wants to outwardly be the person he's always been inside. "Nature made a mistake," he explains to his pastor, "and I need to correct it."

What's wonderful about Lloyd's performance is that his facial expressions, his calm demeanor and his looks of genuine caring and concern for his family — and his vulnerability — are all out there for audiences to see.

Avondina Wills makes the pastor concerned, confused, then amusingly proactive in trying to help Roy recognize that he really isn't a woman inside. He even quotes scripture from Genesis to prove to Roy that God says everyone — men and women — "are one and the same."

Each member of Roy's family handles his startling news in very different fashion. His wife, Irma (a compassionate, affecting Kristin Brownstone) has to endure the brunt of Roy's transfiguration. After finally accepting his decision to change his sex, she then has to figure out whether she can still handle having him/her in the house, in her bed, doing the tasks he did as a man.

Hers is perhaps the biggest leap, and Brownstone brings the audience along with her as she processes all this new information and comes to the realization of what she needs to do.

Their son and daughter, Wayne and Patty Ann, have polar opposite reactions to Roy's dramatic physical journey. Nik Terbeek makes Wayne a shade too black-and-white, fearful now of even letting his dad hug him or sit down to share one of their previous favorite pastimes: Having a beer and watching football on TV.

Solange Marcotte's Patty Ann is simply marvelous. In fact, the scenes between Patty Ann and her dad are probably the funniest and most endearing in the play. She's just short of hilarious when she stands front-and-center and describes to the audience in endless, minute detail every internal part of the male and female reproductive organs.

Patty Ann is also so zoned in on enjoying every small change in her father's body that she asks him very personal questions like "Did you shave your 'pub' line?" She also gets the funniest line in the entire play when she tells her mom, "Guess what? Dad and I have the same cup size!"

As Roy's father Roy, Sr., Frank Widman is achingly good at showing the heartbreaking ways dementia erases memory — especially in one of the play's final scenes when he completely accepts Roy as Ruth, his daughter (though he didn't remember he had one named Ruth), yet refers to his long-suffering wife, Em (Tara McMillin) as "the woman over there."

McMillin isn't right for the part of Roy's mom because, despite graying her hair color, she still looks far too young to be his mother (actually, the two of them look about the same age on stage).

Then there's Lillian Bogovich as Grandma Ruth. Candidly, Bogovich could simply read the telephone book and make it sound exciting but her interludes here are a waste of her talent. It doesn't help that she looks only a tad older than McMillin — certainly not old enough to be Widman's mother. And the monologues Anderson wrote for Ruth are simply not all that fascinating to begin with.

Those casting choices aside, kudos to Actors' Theatre, Beal and her talented cast for bringing an out-of-the-ordinary, absorbing play to the Santa Cruz area, one which is definitely worth seeing. It is not, however, for those who aren't yet in their teens.

Alie Mac does a fine job costuming each character to fit their various personalities, with Bonnie Ronzio doing her usual one-woman-band routine as producer, light board operator and stage manager, and Carina Swanberg designing lights.

At its core, "Normal" is as much about a couple's journey to a new way of living as it is about Roy's changing his gender. Irma is very much the heart of his journey. When the pastor tells her she must leave Roy, she looks stricken as she backs away, touching her heart and cries out, "My heart, my heart."

And how better to end their unusual journey than with Irma looking directly at the audience and saying reflectively, "What we do for love."

‘Looking for Normal’

Produced by: Actors' Theatre

Where: Center Stage, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz

Directed by: Tandy Beal

When: Through April 28

Tickets: Adults: \$32; seniors/students: \$29

Details: www.sccat.org