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CATEGORY ARCHIVES: THEATER REVIEWS

Looking for Normal

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By Jocelyn McMahon

ONE DAY ROY AND HIS WIFE IRMA, the traditional American couple, decide to go to their pastor for marriage counseling, “a little tune-up” as Irma calls it. The pastor cannot wrap his head around what might be so troubling; they appear to have the perfect life. They met in college, have two children, married 25 years, they live somewhere in the mid-west and are well-respected members of their church and community, Roy has a good job and Irma stays home. They have their problems, but, ultimately, they are a team. The pastor points out that many couples hit a rough patch, but Roy says, no, he is still in love with his wife and is not having an affair. But the tune-up quickly becomes a matter of colossal proportions when he admits something even greater: he is woman trapped in a man’s body and wants to change genders.

Looking for Normal by Jane Anderson, which premiered in Los Angeles 2001 and is now playing at Center Stage in Santa Cruz, tracks the metamorphosis of our protagonist Roy over the course of a year, beginning at his 25th wedding anniversary with Irma and ending at their 26th. Refreshingly honest, even blunt, Anderson is unconcerned with whether the audience is “comfortable,” does not exclude any details of the process of the transformation from man to woman, and breaks down gender identity for everyone to understand, offering an informative look at a topic most of the population is still pretty clueless about.

But what does this have to do with me? Entering the theater, I planned to see a touching story, an enlightening show that would offer a glimpse into the topic of gender identity and offer a shout out to the Trans community. I expected to empathize with the characters, but not necessarily to relate. I was wrong.

As director Tandy Beal states in her director’s note “Although most of us will not face the enormity of changing genders, each of us will face times when profound transformation has to happen.” *Looking for Normal* hits our hearts with sincerity and truth that all audiences can identify with: the struggle to discover who we truly are. The play explores topics we all can relate to, comfortably or not, including acceptance, sexuality, religion, faith, family, relationships and ultimately the definition of love.

Jerry Lloyd carries the weight of the show on his shoulders as he portrays the central character throughout his transition. His physicality as Roy is spot on, presenting both the masculine and feminine, the fear and the determination, his love for his family, and his acknowledgment that this change is the only way he can go on living. Lloyd doesn’t change into an utterly feminine caricature or a drag queen over the course of the show, rather he stays the same Roy, just in a different body; a sincere acting choice.

While Roy must come to terms with his identity, Irma (Kristin Brownstone) is left grappling to understand why her husband must change his gender. Ultimately, she must decide whether to continue her marriage or not. Brownstone is a blaze of emotions that captures Irma’s struggle genuinely as she questions whether her capabilities as a wife have somehow perversely influenced Roy. Her performance takes the cake as she gracefully contrasts humor with despair, taking advantage of the witty-one liners that balance the enormity of losing the man she has loved for almost three decades and trying to keep her family going, all while struggling to balance her own emotional needs and hormonal changes, i.e., menopause.

If there weren’t already enough hormones running rampant in the house, their daughter, Patty Ann (Solange Larenas Marcotte), is confronting the onset of puberty and all the glories of menstruation and womanhood that go with it. Offering humorous monologues directed at the audience, Patty Ann offers us sex-ed lessons complete with visual demonstrations. While Marcotte doesn’t fit the physical mold of a pubescent teenager or a tomboy, she acts the part well, mixing naivety with sass; the eye-rolling and rebellion that makes her a convincing teenager. Her struggles with budding femininity are also eye-opening and make us take a step back to look at gender from a fresh perspective. Trapped in a triad of raging hormones the chaos of their household is hilariously honest as Brownstone, Lloyd and Marcotte hit the nail on the head a believable family unit.

We soon meet the fourth member of their family, the distant son Wayne, played by the exceptional Nicolas Terbeek. A band roadie who has been off touring, he receives a letter from his father one day, and the reaction is priceless. Terbeek captures Wayne’s subtle irony flawlessly, and gets a good laugh out of the absurdity of the situation, while his lack of understanding takes the form of anger as he struggles to comprehend his father’s decision. Then again, father and son never really did get each other.

The sometimes clueless but well-meaning pastor, played by Avondina Wills, is always trying to find a fix to the problem. While his bible counseling can get a bit carried away with the one-liners and his ignorance may be the butt of a few jokes (his hush words being *affair, alcoholic, homosexual* as if they were one in the same), Wills’ final monologue provokes chills, capturing the nameless pastor’s complete humility as he dives into Genesis 2:18-24, the story of Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib. He questions the definition of gender, asking whether there isn’t both man and woman in all of us. Are we really that different?

There are other secondary characters that jump in and out of the narrative including Roy’s parents Em (Tara McMilin), his easygoing farm-mother and Roy Sr. (Frank Widman), an ornery old man with rapidly declining health who insists that a woman’s place is in the home. Though strict gender boundaries have been set in place since Roy’s childhood, Em questions her influence on her son when she hears the news, and even blames herself. Forced to choose between her core beliefs and her unconditional love for her child, McMilin captures the struggle of a mother accurately coming alive.

Widman adds a layer of depth to Roy Sr., giving his less than likeable character an empathetic quality while playing slippery decline, mentally and physically, so discreetly that it sneaks up on us and packs an emotional punch. The final exchange between Roy and Roy Sr. in which Roy comes to visit as “his daughter” dressed in full high-heels, hair and makeup is heart-wrenching.

We also get the pleasure of getting to know Roy’s grandmother Ruth, who is already deceased, but whose spirit pops in and out to recount the tales of her rather scandalous life—her days as a nurse in WW2, her decision to leave her husband and son, her tales of travel, the many creative people she met along the way, and the many love affairs that followed—all without batting an eyelash. Lillian Bogovich charmed us with her monologues from beyond the grave that kept us hanging on her every word. “Most people would rather be shocked than enlightened,” she wisely reminds us.

In Beal’s first-time directing a straight play, her vision for *Looking for Normal* is a success, embracing minimalism with zero set changes and no entrances or exits from actors throughout the show except at intermission. With an added Greek Chorus element, the story becomes more than Roy’s but really a story of all that are closest to him. The fluidity of time and space came across despite the lack of set and props (there were some at times) that forced the actors to mime some actions. A few very simple and inexpensive prop pieces would have helped.

Looking For Normal does not tell you what or how to think, and does not preach. Instead it offers a story to make of what you will. It answers questions of the detailed process of gender transformation, but leaves us wondering “What would I do?” It forces us to examine the definition of love and marriage and look how far we’d go to keep a beloved partner.

Or as Anderson summarizes in the final scene: “What we do for love.”