

A&E

Actors' Theatre Explores Transgender Identity in 'Looking for Normal'

A later-in-life identity struggle plays out on local stage

JERRY LLOYD AND KRISTIN BROWNSTONE IN ACTORS' THEATRE'S 'LOOKING FOR NORMAL.' PHOTO: JANA MARCUS

BY **CHRISTINA WATERS**

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Smart direction, skilled performances and a plunge into the fireworks of self-discovery energize the Actors' Theatre production of *Looking for Normal*. It will come as no surprise to audiences that director Tandy Beal knows how to move actors across a stage, but her ability to incite an ensemble into confrontations as poignant as they are raw is a fresh surprise.

Much has changed, evolved and erupted in the almost two decades since Emmy-winning playwright Jane Anderson debuted her play in 2002. The idea that a happily married man would feel so intensely that he's in the wrong body as to opt for the agonies of gender reassignment surgery is not a new one. Today's conversation around gender tends to erupt into rhetoric and identity politics. But in *Looking for Normal*, it's the history of that conversation that motivates Anderson, who went on to write for television's *Mad Men*, and created the Oscar-nominated Glenn Close film *The Wife*.

Married for 25 years in the straight-arrow Midwest, Roy (Jerry Lloyd) and Irma (Kristin Brownstone) seek counseling from their amiable pastor (Avondina Wills). Caught in the upheaval are Roy and Irma's teenage daughter (Solange Marcotte), twentysomething son Wayne (Nicolas Terbeek), and emotionally dense father (Frank Widman) and mother (Tara McMilin).

It all starts with Roy's admission to his wife that while he loves her, he is committed to becoming the woman he was always meant to be—to which his stunned wife replies, "There's no way you're a woman—because only a man could be that selfish!" Indeed, Roy's myopic fixation on his desired change propels this situational drama; a blend of Greek tragedy and high-key sitcom spun through Thornton Wilder.

Once Roy has announced his decision, each member of the family steps forth to react, and ultimately to interact with their shock, dismay and feelings of betrayal. At the center is a remarkably vulnerable performance by Lloyd, whose graceful handling of his character's pain and determination outweighs the script's shortcomings. As his wife, Brownstone gets some of the best lines and most painful/hilarious confrontations. Absolute confidence and just the right amount of wry acceptance (kudos again to Beal) distinguish her portrait of the wife who discovers that she can't stop loving her husband, no matter how much he has changed.

The play as written often makes puzzling choices, including sexual development, menopause and the act of impregnation described in detail as variations on the theme of normal human behavior. Is the playwright suggesting that transitioning one's gender is as typical as having a period? And even Beal's savvy can't quite rescue a non-sequitur sermon about the book of Genesis and God-given gender.

But the short drama offers powerful moments and strong visual play. Actors are on stage throughout, sitting in the shadows until their moment to address the audience. The staging gives quiet dignity and flexibility to the explosive confrontations to come. In a few choice soliloquies, Roy's grandmother (Lillian Bogovich) steps out of the past to reveal her own sexual curiosity during the early 20th century.

As a humorist, Beal is pitch-perfect. The stand-up gestures used by Marcotte as the budding teenager talking us through the biology of puberty are silly, funny and hilariously recognizable. I found the consummate portrayals of central characters compelling enough to sweep through flaws in the text. For theatergoers intrigued by the history of gender issues—before social media obscured common sense and critical debate—this play boldly and candidly introduces some of the key issues and implications that still resonate today.

There is much to chew on in this unflinching production. A sure hand at the helm and some very fine performances make for absorbing theater.

'Looking for Normal,' written by Jane Anderson and directed by Tandy Beal, runs through April 28 at Actors' Theatre, Center Stage, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz. sccat.org.

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Christina Waters was born in Santa Cruz and raised all over the world (thanks to an Air Force dad), with real-world training in painting, music, winetasting, trail running, organic gardening, and teaching. She has a PhD in Philosophy, teaches in the Arts at UCSC and sings with the UCSC Concert Choir. Look for her recent memoir "Inside the Flame" at bookstores everywhere.

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