# ‘The Thin Place’ delivers heavy emotional weight at Santa Cruz County Actors’ Theater

By Jake Thomas

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In Santa Cruz County Actors’ Theater’s new production of “The Thin Place” (written by Lucas Hnath and directed by Miguel Reyna), we have a chilling example of the power of theater to communicate across time and space — and even crossing the bridge between life and death.

Tragedy as a dramatic art has deep roots leading back at least as far as ancient Greece and this cosmopolitan contemporary play, which premiered in New York in 2019, taps into the same groundwater that fed the grapes of Aeschylus’ day. Despite advances in the technology of communication, we still wrestle with the fundamental difficulties of not knowing about death, of grieving our lost loved ones, and of wanting some way of connecting with them here and now. Reyna’s riveting and gorgeous production evokes the power of the human longing to speak with those who have passed on.

Reyna achieves this considerable effect with a talented ensemble of actors and designers who have built an exquisite minimalist set and filled it with the emotional lives of the characters. The intimacy of the small black box theater possesses the elegance of a $200 wine glass filled with intoxicating elixirs both red and white. Drinking wine was a part of the Grecian tradition as a way of opening the emotional gates for theater to achieve its powerful effects. In “The Thin Place,” the characters loosen up their grasp on reality by sharing fine bottles of wine, and the audience experiences their inebriation as a rising dramatic tension. The further they go into their cups, the more we anticipate something mysterious happening. The cast plays tension masterfully, allowing the element of horror to slowly build.

Miguel Reyna. (Courtesy Jake Thomas)

It is a very rare thing to feel a sense of terror in a dramatic production. This play manages to do just that, however. It slowly brings you into the emotional world of the main character Hilda, played with creepy precision by Jennifer Galvin, until you are overwhelmed by her revelations. The woman sitting next to me was sobbing for 20 minutes leading up to the climax of the play. By bringing us into a very real emotional world of the main character, the play ushers us into its terrifying finale. We hear stories about Hilda’s connection to her grandmother as a little girl, and slowly begin to learn more about what she is afraid to reveal until we are confronted with the raw fear of complicated grief. When someone you love dies, it makes you vulnerable in unimaginable ways, and this play brilliantly illustrates that feeling.

The play works as an extended metaphor of theater being a way of communicating with the dead. It uses the relationship between the main character, Hilda, who believes that she can communicate with her deceased loved ones and a medium named Linda who has a career as a spiritualist pretending to speak to people’s dead family members. Their relationship is analogous to the playwright and the audience, the person who artfully crafts a suggestive story and the public who willingly suspend their disbelief for the thrill of the experience. A play is a house haunted by spirits who come alive in our imaginations, and Jennifer Galvin and Tara McMilin exhibit and evoke our power of belief. The play within a play presented by Linda’s seances is like Hamlet crying for Hecuba when the actors visit him during his grief. He too communed with his father’s ghost, and only theater could bring him the emotional truth of his predicament.

“The Thin Place” is a meditation on a timeless theme of grieving and superstition about the dead. It moves quickly, is composed mainly of dialogue, and draws the audience into its action. Four actors fill the stage with emotions and speech, and the room becomes more and more eerie and bleak. The beauty of the design, the elegance of the acting, and the powerful directing combine to make this play a powerful and unforgettable experience. Be forewarned, however, it is not for everyone. If you don’t enjoy the thrill of a haunted house, then you might not want to subject yourself to the terror of this play. If, however, you are a fan of feeling scared and want to embrace the scariest month of the year, then there is no better way than with a viewing of this excellently played production.

“The Thin Place” plays Thursday, Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m., Sunday at 2 p.m. They will also have a special closing performance on Oct. 31. Thursday night is 2 for 1. For tickets, you can visit [www.santacruzactorstheatre.org/tickets](https://www.santacruzactorstheatre.org/tickets).