

TIME FOR A LITTLE THEATER

Cheryl Strayed's "Tiny Beautiful Things" opens in Newport

By **BARBARA B. COVELL**
For the *TODAY*

It is the tiny, beautiful things in life that create powerful revelations about the essence of being human. These are the insights into forgiveness, honesty and sharing the truths about life's journeys, even when these truths are insurmountable burdens. The power of sharing our experiences unvarnished and raw is the greater path to soulful salvation. It's about being the best we can be.

This is the gutsy premise of Portland author Cheryl Strayed's true story as Sugar, an advice columnist for the literary website Rumpus, a two-year gig while she waited for publication of "Wild," the bestseller that would change her life.

Director Marc Maislen of New Visions Arts brings this powerful, moving and courageous show to the Newport Performing Arts Center. Strayed's writing focuses on Sugar's candid and heartfelt responses to letters written by anonymous souls, seeking answers on pivotal issues such as extramarital affairs, forgiveness, relationships, recovery from violence and the death of a child.

What makes this unique is how Strayed reached deep inside herself and shares her own life experiences, candidly revealing her own pain from losing her mother at a young age, enduring sexual abuse as a young child, a father who abandoned his family, failed relationships, betrayal, and the wasted years of being a heroin user. For many of her letter writers, Sugar's candor is the balm they desperately need in the journey and awakening to the tiny beautiful things that make life precious and heartbreaking.

"Once I read this play and wiped away my tears, I knew that Strayed's words, descriptions, personal anecdotes and overarching love enlivened a variety of subjects that go beyond the pages," Maislen said, "I hope that audiences will be touched by the nature of these universal questions and find the place within themselves to reconsider past judgements with greater communication and love."

There is something of everyone in this breathtaking performance.

Sugar is played by Sherron Watson, who



Sherron Watson as Sugar, with and Jeffrey Wilson in the background

aces this complex, embracing character. Watson is an artist who discovered the love of acting while playing a small part in "Othello." This is her first lead role and she embodies Sugar's truths on stage with astonishing realism.

Watson is surrounded by an ensemble cast of changing characters, representing Sugar's letter writers. Three veteran performers portray multiple characters who are seeking advice on all matters of life. Jeffrey Wilson, Nikki Atkins, and Nathan Bush engage in Sugar's responses with emotional powerhouse performances. Consider Atkins as a rape victim who painfully questions sharing her truth to a new love. Bush plays an anguished transgender man spurned by his parents, only to receive a letter from them seven years later. Should he reject their apology or reestablish

the relationship?

And Wilson as the Living Dead Dad whose 22-year-old son was killed by a drunk driver. What measure of relief can be found for his grief and agony?

Sugar gently doles out a message of forgiveness while relating her own transgressions. Self-forgiveness, forgiveness of others, but mostly self-healing through forgiveness. It is the painful shaky step forward for humanity.

"Tiny Beautiful Things" runs for one and a half hours with no intermission and contains adult language. There is much to be learned by peeling back the onion skins of ourselves. And the emotional intimacy creates a palpable bonding between the cast and audience.

The set, designed by Mary Eastman, is a

comfortable view of Sugar's living room and kitchen. All four characters remain on the set throughout this performance. Maislen's blocking creates a relaxed exchange between the Sugar and the letter writers, both present and absent as each scene unfolds.

Stage lighting remains consistent throughout the show. Technical director is Ernest Brown and Sharlei Malovoz is stage manager.

"Tiny Beautiful Things" opens on Friday, Oct. 11, and runs through Sunday, Oct. 27. Friday and Saturday evening performances are at 7 pm, Sunday matinee is at 2 pm. There is one Thursday evening show at 7 pm, on Oct. 24. Tickets, \$25 for adults and seniors and \$15 for students, are available at <https://coastarts.org/events/tiny-beautiful-things> or by calling 541-265-ARTS.

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