

Katia (Miranda Schmidt) listens to her mom (Kim Donahey)



LORD LEEBRICK THEATRE

Troubled Waters

Can baking and writing transform one freighted night?

Memory House is a study in the frustration of writing, remembering, dealing with relationships — and making blueberry pie.

This complex play, now running at the Lord Leebrick Theatre, is about a mother and the daughter she adopted from Russia. Katia (Miranda Schmidt) must finish her college application essay and have it postmarked by midnight on this New Year's Eve if she is to stand a chance at getting into her first choice school. Maggie (Kim Donahey) must confront her own disappointing past in an effort to help her daughter discover memories of her own.

This is a beautiful, well-executed play. Kathleen Tolan's writing is absolutely engaging, with truly funny dialogue. Her precise layering of conflict and emotion will surprise and move audience members.

Maggie is a terrible pie baker, bordering on slapstick. She wants to do it right, but with low skills and questionable ingredients — such as fresh blueberries that have no business being in New York City on the last day of December — she leaves the audience with little hope for the pastry. The pie-baking is a metaphor for

Maggie's imperfect yet ultimately open-armed approach to life and relationships. Maggie, and consequently her pie, are unquestionably the central characters of the play. She is selfish, generous — and thoroughly human.

When Katia asks about her childhood, Maggie speaks of her own past. When Katia asks for answers, Maggie gives her questions. There are times when Maggie's philosophizing strings out for too long, but Katia voices the "Oh my God" feeling as an argument circles around one too many times. Yet Tolan and Donahey succeed in creating a character whom the audience can love, laugh with and find almost as frustrating as any real mother.

Tolan masterfully weaves in Katia's father as a character although he is only present through Maggie's one-sided phone conversations. He is an "important man" driven by moral righteousness. He introduces his daughter to the idea that international adoption, specifically her international adoption, is an imperialist, American plan for ripping children off from bleeding countries. Why? Because he wants her to return to Russia and find her roots, or simply to get a good college

application essay out of her?

The script's primary flaw is that there is not enough information about Katia. She is a teenager: She is angry about geo-political struggles, angry with her parents and angry at the college admissions process. So far, there is nothing particularly extraordinary going on here. The audience knows almost nothing of Katia's love of learning or why we should care if she gets into her first choice school. (I was, however, worried about the pie burning). Katia's lines are at their most authentic when bantering with her mother, but occasionally her dialogue turns into what sounds like an adult writing the lines of a teenager.

That said, Katia is a mix of her parents, with the moral superiority and unfeeling edge of her father combined with her mother's humor and tendency to get caught up in trivia. She feels trapped by her mother's love and constantly seeks to break and then repair the bond. She honestly doesn't know what to remember or what to hope for in the future.

The technical production of the show is energetic. The lighting and set are not always perfect, but they are innovative and captivating, full of inspired details. I thoroughly enjoyed Danny Thomas' sound design, from Bob Dylan to Katia's cell phone with its annoying ringtone. Would any self-respecting teenager set her phone to actually ring rather than play music to alert the owner to a call? Probably not, but she obviously feared it was her pompous father every time it went off, and that got me as tense as it seemed to make the characters.

In the end, what had me repeatedly wiping back tears was watching a mother's complex dance with her daughter. The emotion isn't about an essay or a memory or a pie but about a relationship that was never what it could have been and has little sense of where it is supposed to go. In the end, does Maggie's pie, the one the audience smells as it actually bakes on stage, the one representing her humorous yet ill-executed relationship with her daughter, turn out? Get your tickets and see. **EW**

Memory House plays through Feb. 2. Tickets available at www.lordleebrick.com or 465-1506.

Opening Nights

Awake and Sing! opens at the Very Little Theatre Friday, Jan. 18. Happy about the recession/depression, the war, the general economic trauma suffered by recent immigrants and other working-class folk? No? Hey, head to the VLT for Clifford Odets' 1935 play, which acknowledges the roadblocks to prosperity even as it encourages its characters to pursue some version of the American dream. Or rather, it sets that pursuit in motion and lets its characters say where the dream ends. *Awake and Sing!* runs through Feb. 9, with talkback sessions after the Jan. 31 and Feb. 3 shows. Tix available at 344-7751.

Ring of Fire opens at Actors Cabaret of Eugene Friday, Jan. 18. Following the success of last summer's *All Shook Up* (a musical with the barest thread of a plot holding together joyful celebrations of Elvis classics), ACE opens the Broadway celebration of Johnny Cash. OK, yes, Cash did some harder material than The King (in all kinds of ways), and one of the songs in the show is his cover of Trent Reznor's "Hurt," but with 14 cast members pumping out 38 (**38!**) Johnny Cash songs, who cares about the plot of this Broadway piece? If you liked the music of *Walk the Line*, you'll fall for *Ring of Fire*, which runs through Feb. 23. Tix available at www.actorscabaret.org or 683-4368.

So Far From Shore opens at the Wildish Theatre in Springfield Friday, Jan. 18. This is a play about healing from childhood sexual abuse written by a local playwright. See article on p. 32 for more information. *So Far From Shore* runs through Feb. 2. Tix available at www.sofartheplay.com or 606-1125.

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