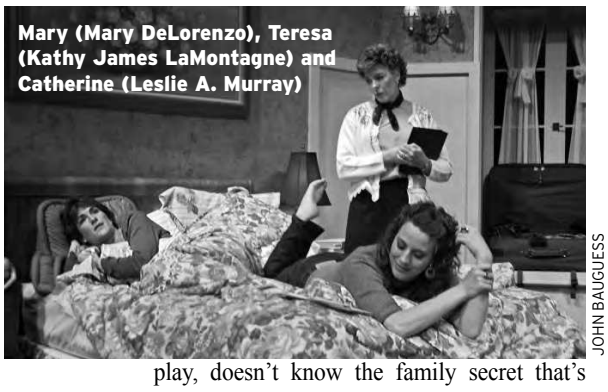
Looking Backward

VLT's newest sister show falls short



Mary (Mary DeLorenzo), Teresa (Kathy James LaMontagne) and Catherine (Leslie A. Murray)

JOHN BAUGUESS

Death, secrets and years of acrimony suffuse the air in the Very Little Theatre's *The Memory of Water*. Not that they get in the way of comedy, of course.

English playwright Shelagh Stephenson's 1996 play gives three prominent roles to women, rare enough in the Eugene theatrical landscape that we should perhaps reward the mere existence of the play. The VLT's 79-year history also stands as a monument to community theater and the dedication of its volunteers (for an interview with longtime VLT members Scott Barkhurst and Karen Scheeland, check out blogs.eugeneweekly.com). Yet static staging and less than convincing acting from two of the three leads cause *Memory* to limp along, never quite reaching climax or finding resolution.

The sisters' problems get a full-on display in the plot, set during the two days just before their mother's funeral. Early on, Mary (Mary DeLorenzo) fretfully expresses her desire for lost things, including sleep. DeLorenzo's forceful American accent made me wonder if her character's desperate exhaustion came from jet lag. But no; all of the action takes place in England. The wildly varying accents of the cast throw unecessary confusion into the mix.

Karen Scheeland plays Vi, the now-ghostly mother, and she's the one actor who doesn't have to work for British accent; Scheeland grew up in the U.K. Vi becomes visible several times in scenes with Mary, and she fills her daughter's space with unreconciled grudges, resentments, anger and embarrassment.

These scenes should be where emotions pack a wallop, but that's not what happens. DeLorenzo would do well to back off emotionally in early scenes so that later scenes, wherein Secrets Are Revealed, could become more convincing — and she should eliminate that aggrieved whine. Mary is a successful and supposedly driven doctor who, though not fulfilled emotionally, would show a bit more maturity.

Speaking of maturity, the youngest sister, Catherine (Leslie A. Murray), bounces from mania to mania, drinking and drugging and throwing herself at her sisters' men. A little of Catherine's intensity goes a long way, and again, with a bit of restraint early on, Murray can make Catherine's later character explorations much more effective. We're meant to see the loneliness that's imposed on Catherine, who didn't grow up close to her older sisters and who still, by the end of the play, doesn't know the family secret that's both bonding and harming her older sisters. The character of Catherine merits more than a parody; she's a person — and the audience must see beyond her antic disposition into her wounded heart.

To deal with her younger sister's pain, Teresa (Kathy James LaMontagne), so capable and mature — she's the one who deals with all of the arrangement details, from being near when her mother dies to picking the funeral flowers — disapproves and comforts in equal measure. LaMontagne, in pitch-perfect costume, doesn't deliver on the accent but otherwise serves to anchor the trio. Teresa wants (and whines for) recognition and reward for being a good daughter, but she's not blind to the ways her sisters have suffered. Her inability to see what her husband Frank (a serviceable William Campbell) wants and needs will cause problems in the future, yet she's generally successful as a human being.

Chris McVay as Mary's married lover Mike also does a decent job in his essentially background role; this play is not about the men any more than it's about the sisters' contemporary lives. This play concerns the past.

Many lines turn on the fickle nature of memory, especially in family confrontations: Who was the one abandoned at the beach? Who was it throwing up on the television after a night of drunken revelry?

The real question, of course, underpins all of this: Whom did Vi love most? An energetic set piece at the end of the first act succeeds best at showing both the frenzy and vulnerability of all three sisters in the wake of losing their harsh, hilarious, tough mother. But extraneous appearances by Vi mar what should be the delicately unspoken effect of her memory hovering over the girls. Those moments combine with sometimes deadly blocking to suck energy from the narrative. In general, despite a goodly dash of humor throughout the play, *Memory of Water* never quite coheres. **EW**

The Memory of Water *runs through June 21 at the VLT. Tix at 344-7751.*