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Rebecca Nachison and Nancy Hopps in *Circle Mirror*

That One Time, at Drama Class

Secrets and lies in *Circle Mirror Transformation*

Get people in small groups, get 'em talking, and see what happens: one of the classic ways to advance a fictional narrative. If the writer creates characters who ping off of each other, challenge the leader, interact with each other offstage, so much the better for those reading or watching the narrative play out.

In Annie Baker's *Circle Mirror Transformation*, now running at the Lord Leebrick Theatre, five Vermonters get to know each other during six weeks of an adult community drama class. Their in-class interactions form the entire 110-minute, no-intermission comedy.

The sharply written script also baldly addresses betrayal, sadness and loss and the ways humans fool themselves as if they're actors performing for an audience. Amy Dunn's set design, with the intimacy of the Leebrick's tiny current space, includes a mirror that reflects a fair portion of the seats. This reflection, a clear way to connect the people onstage with the people off, implicates the viewers in this piece about middle-class artsy people living in and through small discoveries that reverberate for years.

Painfully funny moments in the play pop out between James (Peter Holden) and his wife, Martha (Rebecca Nachison), the teacher of the class, and between eager, blunt Schultz (David Mort) and flirty, careless Theresa (Nancy Hopps). Not as painful but still funny is 16-year-old Lauren (Lacy Allen), who looks scornfully and fearfully at the adults — is she going to be a failure, the way she thinks most of them are? Is she going to learn *anything* from them? Why did she even take this class?

That's a good question for all four students, not to mention the instructor. Martha seems to be teaching this group as a way to earn a little extra income and possibly as a way to experiment with some teaching ideas. But her plans blow open long-held beliefs and understandings, leading in some cases to healing and some to harm.

One frustratingly difficult theater exercise turns the audience into a suspenseful, silent cheering squad for the characters. As anyone who's ever been in a theater (dance, yoga, art, alternative spirituality, etc.) class can probably attest,

it's a pitch-perfect example of the absurd/useful exercises that go on in those classes. You have your goofy trust exercises, your story-telling, your exercises meant to deepen one's relationship with others in the class, all of which appear crazy but somehow help create and cement a performing community. But each community's binding falls apart eventually, and in *Circle Mirror*, the deepening and opening up of self quickly arrives at the third rail of group dynamics: sex.

Theresa's flowing garments and pelvic-rotation hula hooping define her way of connecting with her body. Hopps plays her as a half-innocent, seducing everyone in the class away from Martha just by her wide-eyed, flexible-bodied existence, but some of her actions tell a competing story. This sort of conflicting narrative plays out for most of the characters: Schultz acts a bit dense, but he's a tender guy who's both much angrier and much smarter than his early words and some of his halting speech might indicate. James, a type of person Eugeneans may understand all too well — he seems open to learning, but that's in the service of an aging hippie macking on any woman in sight — sweetly portrays his wife talking about herself just after the play opens.

Allen (who was superb in last year's *The Highest Tide* at the UO) makes Lauren look so whiny and vacuous early on that her perspicacity in her final scene with Schultz, which neatly encapsulates both the playwright's plans for her characters and some of Lauren's own projections, emerges as a surprise. The play's funny, hard, sad, a fair reflection of middle-class people awkwardly and tentatively picking up the pieces of broken lives — or breaking lives in a heedless pursuit of feeling.

The humor provides delights of one kind; the undercutting secrets and lies goose the characters with a necessary spur of pain. Playwright Baker crafts a world that's about telling stories, about the stories we tell ourselves and the stories we tell each other, not to mention the stories we tell about each other. The stories zip with amusement and flicker with hurt, but they're what we have. Maybe, she seems to suggest with delicate generosity at the conclusion of the play, that's enough. **EW**

Circle Mirror Transformation runs through Jan. 29 at the Lord Leebrick Theatre. Tix at lordleebrick.com or 541-465-1506.