

STAGES OF GRIEF

VLT's excellent production of *The Quality of Life* makes meaning of senseless death

Two couples, one reeling from the horrific murder of their only daughter, the other coping with a terminal illness that is reaching its late stage, come together and confront their demons: This is the thumbiest of thumbnail sketches of *The Quality of Life*, a play by Jane Anderson that explores the specter of death, the lash of loss, the cycles of grief and how people make meaning amid chaos and crisis — in short, it's about life itself.

But what strong, challenging work of art isn't, in the final tally, about life itself? Digging deeper, then, we can see the specific rhythms and intimate concerns of Anderson's dramatic comedy, now in production at Very Little Theatre under the able direction of Carol Horne Dennis:

Bill and Dinah (David Smith and Tere Tronson) are the quintessential Midwestern couple: buttoned-up, Protestant-proud, neighborly but skeptical in a politely pinched sort of way. Still in shock a year after their daughter's death, they decide, a bit reluctantly, to fly from Ohio to the Berkeley Hills to visit Dinah's free-spirited cousin Jeanette (Storm Kennedy), whose husband Neil (John White) has decided to end his life before cancer devours him entirely.

The action of the play takes place outside the yurt Jeanette and Neil have set up after their home was devoured by a wildfire. Amid this apocalyptic setting — with the couple's burnt and melted possessions dangling from dead trees like ominous ornaments of loss — the couples struggle to make sense of their mutual burdens. They thrust and parry at each other, as they seek at once to understand and be understood; they manifest the stages of grief in confrontation, anger, bemusement and, finally, a besieged kind of rapprochement.



STORM KENNEDY AND JOHN WHITE IN VLT'S *THE QUALITY OF LIFE*

This is a beautifully disarming play. At first, it appears that Anderson is trafficking in broad stereotypes: Bill, the furiously devout Christian, berates the hippie-dippy Neil for his cosmological drift, attacking him in advance for the sin of suicide (as the audience chuckles with smug dismissal); Dinah, at once uptight and open-minded, gets stoned on Neil's weed in an attempt to access the alien worldview of a pair of liberal NorCal tofu-munchers (as the audience chuckles with a knowing wink).

But grief, in its ravaging vulnerability and confusion, is as likely to bring healing as it is to unleash annihilation. As these two couples execute an existential waltz around their mutual incomprehension, a sort of thaw sets in, a warming amid the holocaust within and without. Could it be that Bill's brimfire piety holds a truth Neil and Jeannette have

conveniently ignored? And perhaps, in turn, might these middle-aged hipsters living in a hut hold a solution for Bill and Dinah's marital paralysis?

VLT's production treats *The Quality of Life* with just the right amount of dignity, honor and irreverence; it ekes out the play's wry humor with gentle gestures of compassion and irony, and it digs deep when the play delves into heavy emotional territory, all without tripping into slapstick or melodrama. The cast is excellent across the board. It's rare to see four actors so evenly balanced, so dynamically simpatico, and that's exactly what is called for in this play about life, death and how we deal. ■

The Quality of Life plays through March 26 at the Very Little Theatre; tickets and info at TheVLT.com or 344-7751.

BOOKS BY AMY SCHNEIDER

HELL-RAISER

Author Michael Helquist to speak on Oregon anarchist Marie Equi

She advocated for reproductive rights; she performed abortions as a doctor; she fell in love with women; she fought for a living wage — and she was born in 1872.

Marie Equi, a Portland doctor who upended society's expectations of a turn-of-the-century woman, is the topic of a March 18 talk by San Francisco author Michael Helquist. He wrote her biography, which was published last year through Oregon State University Press.

"When I was learning more about her, I was really impressed with her passion — how bold and courageous and seemingly fearless she was about the causes that she was interested in," Helquist says. "She was someone who didn't let the disadvantages and restrictions in her life hold her down."

The book tells the story of Equi's life, starting with her working-class childhood in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and following her to the West Coast, where she studied

medicine in San Francisco and became a general practitioner in Portland.

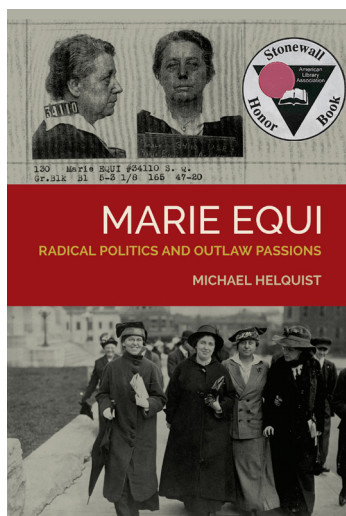
"When I give talks, I invariably hear, 'Why have we never heard of her?'" Helquist says. "My interpretation is that she was hidden from history, at best by neglect, and perhaps by discomfort."

Because Equi was a lesbian and a radical activist, Helquist says, historians might have hesitated to write about her. Digging up source material posed another obstacle.

"When you're writing about a minority, a woman, an LGBT person or an immigrant, it's really challenging because most of these people did not have the resources or time to write their life story or keep a journal," Helquist says. "But if we let that keep us from writing stories, we lose too much of our history and the stories of ourselves."

As a gay man, Helquist says he found Equi's story particularly important to tell considering the scarcity of knowledge about LGBT people during that time period.

"There is very little LGBT history on the West Coast up to World War II, and there wasn't even a word in usage for 'lesbian' in her time. I found it remarkable that she lived as out as she did, and for LGBT people it reclaims some history to see someone from our community who was there and a part of civic life."



While researching the book, Helquist says he and his partner traveled to Equi's hometown of New Bedford and dug up church records and county deeds. He poured through page after page of old newspaper articles and found a front page *Oregonian* story from 1906 detailing a saga in which Equi's girlfriend fought with her family for inheritance money.

That discovery led to court records with Equi's testimony for her girlfriend, which included even more details of her life.

"You can imagine how exciting that was to discover," Helquist says.

For his talk at the UO, Helquist says he'll cover a range of topics connected to Equi's story. To address Equi's political activism, Helquist says he plans to discuss what the term "radical" means, in both historical and modern contexts. He'd also like to bring up sexual identity and how society's thoughts on the subject have changed over time.

Helquist says he's pleased with the reception of his work and that he appreciated working with Oregon State University Press to publish the book — the American Library Association recently named *Marie Equi* a 2016 Stonewall Honor Book.

Helquist intentionally wrote the book to read like a novel, he says, to more vividly illustrate Equi's life. Remarkably, many of the causes Equi fought for are still relevant today.

"I sometimes ask people to imagine someone who fights on the front lines for a living wage, reproductive rights and an overhaul of the criminal justice system," Helquist says. "She did all that nearly 100 years ago." ■

Helquist's presentation, "Hidden from History No More: Oregon's Anarchist Marie Equi," takes place 3 pm Friday, March 18, in the Browsing Room of the University of Oregon's Knight Library. The talk is free and open to the public.