



GIVING CARE

OCT's production of *Blackberry Winter* offers a powerful new portrait of illness and healing

Sharply written and deeply empathic, Steve Yockey's *Blackberry Winter* trains a bright light on Vivienne, whose mother has lived with Alzheimer's disease for a few years and is now in the throes of transitioning from assisted living (Vivienne refers to it as "the Residence Inn") to a more confining, yet safer, nursing home.

Played with tenderness and perfect clarity by Mary Buss, Vivienne is magnetizing as she draws us towards onstage objects that both elicit and anchor all-too fleeting memories: a little wooden horse, a pile of ladies' scarves, a trowel.

Buss' Vivienne is irreverent and approachable, with perfect comic timing; she's the kind of person you'd be relieved to find yourself chatting with at an uncomfortable party.

Yet nestled within her stories is a tactile quality — a feeling of hands employed in the elusive and exhausting act of living, whether that's kneading dough, digging in the

dirt or bathing someone who can no longer bathe herself.

Vivienne is often up at night, she explains, baking her mother's famous coconut cake. When the day's pressures become too great, Vivienne takes solace in the routine divination of flour and butter and sugar.

And cached within the comforting science of routines, Vivienne has created a fable: a cosmological understanding of Alzheimer's and its origins, a creation myth, to help herself comprehend and cope with her mother's ever-entangling brain.

The fable is told here with the aid of two able cast members: Dan Pegoda as the Grey Mole and Erica Towe as the White Egret. Costumes by Sarah Gahagan, lighting by Michael A. Peterson and projections by Tim Rogers complete the vision.

The florid tale, told in three parts, contrasts dynamically against Brad Steinmetz's set, which evokes a clinical hominess.

Under the direction of Craig Willis, the show glides along seemingly effortlessly, with Buss a tour de force, slipping constantly from breezy anecdote to emotional reveal.

In theater, we've heard from victims of illness, for example, Tony Kushner's Prior in *Angels in America* or Margaret Edson's Vivian in *Wit*. Such characters have shown us the counterpoint — between person and institution, between human being and healing.

But Yockey has punched into new territory with his point of view. "Care. Giver," Vivienne says, imbuing the words with gestural weight, expressing, in the briefest instant, her reluctance, anger, fear and love.

Approachable and funny, Vivienne is heartbreaking — not because she fails but because, like any of us, she sometimes falters. ■

Blackberry Winter continues through May 7 at Oregon Contemporary Theatre; \$15-\$30, tickets at 541-465-1506 or octheatre.org.

THE ORIGINAL SUPER GROUP

Jukebox musical *Million Dollar Quartet* celebrates the 1956 session that brought together Cash, Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis and Carl Perkins



If we could time travel, rock-'n'-roll fans might want to dial their wayback machines to Memphis' Sun Records, Dec. 4, 1956, when legends Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins and Johnny Cash created an unforgettable musical session.

Perkins, already a powerhouse with hits like "Blue Suede Shoes," had booked the studio that day and hired a little-known session player to back him up — a guy named Jerry Lee Lewis.

Jason Cohen plays Lewis in the touring production of *Million Dollar Quartet*, coming to the Hult Center April 26-27. "All the music is played live by the actors onstage," Cohen says. "When I got the role, I watched footage of Lewis to learn his tricks."

Sixty years ago, 21-year-old Elvis Presley happened by the studio, too, with his girlfriend in tow. Cash, signed by Sun as a country artist, also showed up.

The four artists laid down 20 tracks, riffing on each other's tunes. Someone called the local paper, snapped a photo and the rest, as they say, is history.

Flash-forward to 2006, when the jukebox musical *Million Dollar Quartet* bursts on the scene, landing on Broadway in 2010 and launching worldwide tours soon after.

The show features irresistible hits like "Folsom Prison Blues," "Long Tall Sally" and "Hound Dog."

"If we could have been a fly on the wall during their session, we would have seen a lot of big egos," Cohen says. "And heard some great music. This is a high-energy show. It'll make audiences feel like they're a kid again." ■

Million Dollar Quartet plays 7:30 pm Tuesday and Wednesday, April 26-27, at the Hult Center; \$33 and up, tickets at Hult Center Box office, 541-682-5000 or by visiting broadwayineugene.com.