

REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS FUTURE

Memory and mortality are contested realms in Jordan Harrison's sci-fi drama *Marjorie Prime*

Jordan Harrison's excellent play, the Pulitzer-nominated *Marjorie Prime* — now at Oregon Contemporary Theatre under the direction of Willow Norton — tackles the prickly issue of artificial intelligence in much the same way Raymond Carver's short stories take on the mute pangs of working-class despair — as a sparse domestic drama teetering on an abyss of absence, loss and strangled desire. And, like Carver's work, Harrison's play is by turns arid and profound, shot through with a prosaic tedium that barely girds the sadness humming beneath its surface.

Marjorie (Ellen Chace) is an elderly widow whose assisted living situation includes the pixilated company of her deceased husband Walter (Scott Machado), a computer-generated "prime" whom she chooses to have reincarnated as his younger, 30-something self.

In a beautiful sci-fi twist, it is Marjorie who builds Walter from memory, as she fills him with information about himself; Walter, for his part, is an apt pupil, eager to please his wife by becoming a perfect reflection of her husband, or rather, her memories of her husband, an act of narcissistic projection that presents difficulties in accepting Walter as anything other than a mirror of Marjorie's self.

Marjorie's daughter, Tess (Ruth Mandsager), struggles against the bitterness and resentment she feels toward her mother, for reasons that are slowly revealed — one of the minor reasons being Marjorie's perceived disapproval of Tess' husband, the good-natured Jon (Dan Pegoda), a latter-day hippie whose beard, Marjorie quips, was like one

of the guys from ZZ Top.

Among these four characters a tug of war takes place, in which difficult memories are negotiated, framed and re-fashioned as they are fed (or, perhaps, not fed) into a computer-simulated "companion" meant to resemble the dead person they've replaced.

The play is less a sci-fi parable than a kind of extended *Twilight Zone* episode without the big reveal; instead of a shocker ending, *Marjorie Prime* slowly and steadily ratchets up the discomfort, although the dis-ease it inspires is of the subtlest kind, hiding in the corners of what, on the surface, might appear a rather mundane family drama. With its single set — a blue-tinted room furnished in neo-Bauhaus style — and its long stretches of silence interspersed with the everyday interactions of a typically dysfunctional family struggling to communicate, this play is like a slice of Tennessee Williams or Tracy Letts.

Of course, as the title implies, Marjorie herself — a mere mortal, full of memories at once painful and effervescent — is destined to be replaced. As Joan Didion famously pointed out, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," but what happens when the stories themselves become more important than the living?

If human history can be viewed as one long and tragic act of over-compensation to stave off the inevitable, then our tinkering with artificial intelligence — the avatars of immortality — is but an odd twist in the foiled narrative of religion. What need is there for a god, when we can assume that role ourselves? Indeed, we may achieve the immortal-

SCOTT MACHADO AND ELLEN CHACE IN *MARJORIE PRIME*



ity for which we so desperately strive. We just won't be around to enjoy it.

The cast is strong across the board and Norton's tight, economical direction brings an eerie steeliness to the proceedings. That said, *Marjorie Prime* is not always an easy play to behold; at moments a kind of enervated boredom nipped at my heels, though I never felt unengaged. And its emotional impact is subtle and lasting. It wasn't until the aftermath that I realized how hard I'd been punched in the guts. ■

Marjorie Prime plays through Nov. 25 at Oregon Contemporary Theatre; 541-465-1506 or octrtheatre.org.

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