

'Life gets messy. Let's show it.'

Coaster Theatre presents "night, Mother," a drama about suicide and choice

Jessie Cates has severe epilepsy. She can't keep a job and lives with her mother out in the country. Her father is dead, her husband has divorced her, and her son is a juvenile delinquent. But, now in her 40s, she has reached a point where her medications seem to be working. She's finally clear-headed.

So, one day, Jessie announces to her mother, Thelma Cates, that she plans to kill herself.

This is the set-up for "night, Mother," Marsha Norman's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama that opened at the Coaster Theatre on Jan. 30 and runs through Feb. 21.

"It's just so well crafted — oh my gosh, so well written," said Margaret Page, who plays Thelma. "It's definitely going to prompt discussion." (Early on, in fact, Page's participation in the play provoked a conversation with a "card-carrying Catholic" friend about Oregon's Death with Dignity Act, she said.)

"night, Mother," first performed in 1983, is disturbing and unforgettable because it presents suicide not merely as a tragedy but as a choice — as a reasoned decision, said Sheila Shaffer, director of the Coaster production.

Jessie's decision is "not being influenced by depression or physical pain," she said. On the contrary: Jessie looks at her life objectively, sees where it is going and simply chooses to discontinue it.

Death with dignity

One of the reasons "night, Mother" deserved the Pulitzer, Shaffer said, is that the characters, two strong-willed women, make compelling arguments. Some audience members may be put off by Jessie's uncomfortably persuasive case for suicide.

Jessie, played by Ann Bronson, "has a monologue where she says she's been waiting for the person she was supposed to grow up to be, and that person never came," Shaffer said.

Thelma feels responsible for Jesse's decision and tries to talk her daughter out of it. But Jessie tries to convince her mother that it's nobody's decision but her own. "It wasn't a de-



Submitted photo by George Vetter/Cannon-Beach.net

Ann Bronson, left, and Margaret Page, right, star in the Coaster Theatre's production of "night, Mother" as Jessie Cates and Thelma Cates, respectively. The play, which won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for drama, presents suicide not just as a tragedy but as a choice. It is not for younger audiences.

cision that she's come to overnight. This is something she's been thinking about."

"A mother's love is an elemental force, and a mother wants the best for her children," Page said. "It's just that, sometimes, what the parents want isn't necessarily what the child wants."

As "night, Mother" — which takes place in real time — proceeds toward its climax, Thelma watches helplessly as her daughter's behavior grows increasingly alarming. Jessie, she realizes, is not crying out for help but is on a mission: She is determined to take control over a life that has, until now, offered her very little control.

"It's going to make people think. It's going to make people feel," Page said.

Light and dark

Shaffer, a 13-year Coaster veteran, played Thelma in graduate school.

When she heard the Coaster's program committee had selected "night, Mother" for its 2015 season, "I was like, 'Oh — my — God,'" she said, laughing. "I couldn't even imagine myself getting into that headspace again."

Her personal connection to the play is partly why Patrick Lathrop, the theater's executive director, asked Shaffer to direct it. She already knew the play well and "had a sensitivity toward it," Lathrop said.

"It takes you on a personal journey that turns you inside out," Shaffer said. "You really have to question and think about what you would do in this situation ... and the emotions are high."

"night, Mother," — which later became a 1986 film starring Sissy Spacek and Anne Bancroft as Jessie and Thelma, respectively — is traditionally staged as a one-act. But Shaffer said she will have an intermission at roughly the 45-minute mark, making the full show almost two hours.

Lathrop admits that the play will not be everyone's cup of tea. He won't be surprised if there's at least one walk-out during intermission, he said. The subject may be one that some folks in the audience either aren't ready to deal with or have dealt with and would rather not do so again.

For people who have faced suicide in one form or another, it may be too triggering. They may say, "That's just way too close to home," Shaffer said.

But others who have considered or attempted suicide, or experienced someone they love do the same, may say, "I can totally relate, and I'm so glad they're writing something about this, because this will help people understand what I went through."

To be clear, though: "night, Mother" isn't a play with uninterrupted despair. Like most engaging scripts, it contains scenes of joy and love and

laughter — like when mother and daughter just sit down and drink hot cocoa together, she said.

"There (have) to be moments of levity. There (have) to be moments of tenderness in between the moments of crying and grief and anger, because that makes the happiness even better and the grief even more devastating," she said.

"You need the dark in order for the light to shine through," Lathrop said. "Most aspects of life have both dark and light qualities, so, therefore, most plays do also."

Empathy

Why should anyone see this play? The answer, Shaffer said, is empathy.

"People should go see it to have a better understanding about how to deal with their fellow human beings, and their own family members sometimes," Shaffer said. "How can you form an opinion about a subject matter like suicide unless you know the full story and you know the entire reasoning behind somebody's decision? It's not something to be taken lightly."

Page considers a good play one that "provides you with a takeaway. And the takeaway, in my opinion, from 'night, Mother' is that you can never really know the people around you. You can only love and forgive them. And, I think, in that respect, it's almost an inspiration."

The purpose of theater is "to make us reflect on life, reflect on our lives," Lathrop said.

"Life gets messy," Shaffer said. "Let's show it."



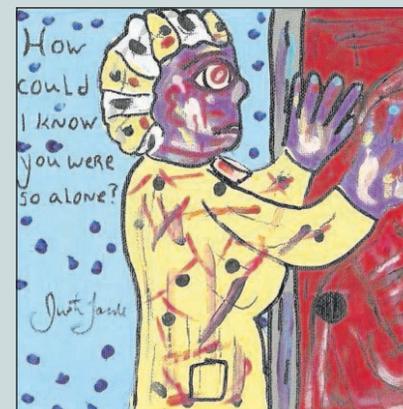
Submitted photo

"Jessie Decides" by Justin Lacche.

Art inspires art

In congruence with the play "night, Mother," the Coaster Theatre will show a special exhibit. Artist Justin Lacche created five original paintings about the play, which will be on display at the theater during the show's run, now through Feb. 21.

Lacche lives in Hillsboro, where he works in sports business. He is a former correspondent for The Daily Astorian and a former staff reporter for the Cannon Beach Gazette and the Seaside Signal.



Submitted photo

"The Moment" by Justin Lacche.

the arts

VISUAL ARTS • LITERATURE • THEATER • MUSIC & MORE

Story by ERICK BENGEL • EO MEDIA GROUP