



The Sun Star

University of Alaska Fairbanks

UAF Theatre Presents: "How I Learned to Drive"

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A review by Jesse Hoff
Sun Star Contributor

"Sometimes to tell a secret you first have to teach a lesson," says Li'l Bit, played by student Katie Sousa at the start of the play "How I Learned to Drive," which opened at the Lee Salisbury Theater last weekend. Issues of misogyny, pedophilia, and incest, it seems, can only stay locked away for so long until a few brave souls are willing to confront them in the open or - better yet - in the theater.

The play touches on issues that make the majority of us squeamish, but provides



plenty of comedic relief and it's easy to see why playwright Paula Vogel won a Pulitzer Prize for the drama in 1998. The play runs for about an hour and a half and is performed in an intimate venue of only 100 seats at the back of the Salisbury Theater. The graceful lines of the set made me want to strap on my roller-blades and skate around the top.

The story follows the uncomfortable sexual relationship between Li'l Bit and her aunt's husband, Uncle Peck, played by Andrew Cassel, beginning in Li'l Bit's childhood and continuing as she matures into womanhood. "What I like about this play is that I see both stories," said director Carrie Baker. "I feel compassion for both Uncle Peck and Li'l Bit."

There's a fine line between entertainment and education, and to provide both is the mark of the truly talented. Baker and her cast make us laugh and think at the same time, more than once. Sousa is convincing as Li'l Bit from ages 11 to 35. Surprisingly, she often

comes across as the aggressor in the relationship with her uncle. It's not till the end of the play that we see the oldest flashback of all, which shows how the twisted relationship began.

Cassel is creepy and vile as Uncle Peck but, despite his clearly twisted psyche, we still pity him. His monologue about fishing especially will make one wonder how many more children he may have abused and where this viscous cycle began. The three other actors - Sergio Santana, Hadassah Nelson, and Claire Wool - play the Male, Female, and Teenage Greek Chorus, and are just as funny and moving as the two leads. The plays period setting is identified when the trio break into an unexplained doo-wop song.

Overall, the play is far from straightforward and will leave you wondering where the fine line exists between what is right and what is wrong. So many different points of view are given that you start to appreciate how very far we've come as a society with laws and norms of behavior.

Top Left: Eleven-year-old Li'l Bit (Katie Sousa) is molested by her Uncle Peck (Andrew Cassel) while he teaches her to drive for the first time.

Left: Li'l Bit emphatically tells her grandfather (Sergio Santana) and family about the importance of dramatic literature.

All photos by Jesse Hoff / Sun Star



So the audience get to hear Li'l Bit's secret, but what is the lesson that she speaks of at the beginning of the play?

"You see [Li'l Bit] going through that process of forgiveness, and that's where we get to by the end of the play - and I think that's beautiful," says Baker. It's that ability to forgive that make some secrets worth telling.

Above: Uncle Peck (Andrew Cassel) proposes to Li'l Bit (Katie Sousa) on her 18th birthday.

Below: Katie Sousa (as Li'l Bit) tried to convince her mother (Hadassah Nelson) to let her go on a trip with her Uncle Peck.

