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From the *Los Angeles Times*

THEATER REVIEW

'Brownstone'

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Special to The Times

April 1, 2008

They still call them "women's pictures" -- movies in which spirited female characters get into trouble on the bumpy road to bliss. This weekend, [Laguna Playhouse](#) opened a triple chick flick on stage: Catherine Butterfield's "Brownstone," a dramedy that follows three restless women who inhabit the same Manhattan address during different decades. Think "The Philadelphia Story" and "Stage Door" with a dash of Altman's "Three Women" and the midcareer works of Demi Moore.

The first story begins on the eve of World War II. Heiress Davia (Deborah Puette) bristles at her tycoon father's controlling ways, so marrying Daddy's pick -- self-deprecating journalist Stephen (Brian Rohan) -- galls her to no end. Even if she is madly in love with him.

Fast forward to 1978, as Maureen and Deena (Kim Shively and Dorothea Harahan) arrive in search of stage fame. Not quite born in a trunk, they're nevertheless sleeping in their coats and suitcases, since Davia's elegant brownstone has devolved into a drafty dump. As pert Texas princess Deena has the movers haul in a chintz sofa and rattan laundry hamper, we know she's going to have trouble adjusting to Big Apple asphalt.

Finally, we meet Jessica and Jason (Laurie Naughton and Gino Anthony Pesi), a yuppie power couple in 2000 whose idea of foreplay is taking business calls at parties to impress guests. When Jessica gets pregnant, the two find their negotiating skills aren't so bulletproof when turned on each other.

The playhouse commissioned this diverting world premiere after Butterfield's "The Sleeper" proved a hit with Laguna audiences. The playwright has an engaging, easy tone, and she's refreshingly frank about the ways women let their desire tie them into knots. If the stories' turns aren't always surprising, we nonetheless take an interest in these occupants, curious to know whether they'll live happily, or regretfully, ever after.

Sometimes Butterfield's clever device gets in her way. Many of the scenes are short, emphasizing narrative more than character, and after a while you wish the period furniture would stop sliding in and out for each scene change. Still, "Brownstone" is a cozy enough place for the evening.

Also directing, Butterfield knows the theatrical pleasure of her piece: watching three narratives unfold simultaneously, each tale playing off the others. The play's highlights are when all the characters share the stage, their lives and vulnerabilities side by side.

Though Lauren Helpen's uncluttered drawing-room set doesn't solve the problem of the wide stage, Julie Keen's costumes keep the eye satisfied. As the patrician Davia, Puette wears one period ensemble after another and sports a droll black hat that would have made Ninotchka envious.

The cast navigates gracefully through the narratives, although it's Puette who steals the show. She enters every scene with an invisible leopard on a leash, a Hepburn-esque heroine who knows what's good for her but can't bear to admit it. Naughton also turns in nice work as a driven career woman derailed by biology, finding layers of pain under a soapy plot involving Sept. 11.

Given that only about 10% of the entertainment industry's working directors are female, it's good to see a woman at the helm, even if the places she's taking us are often familiar.

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