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Regional

Brownstone

(Moulton Theater; 420 seats; \$65 top)

By BOB VERINI

A Laguna Playhouse presentation of a play in two acts, written and directed by Catherine Butterfield.

Davia - Deborah Puette
Stephen - Brian Rohan
Maureen - Kim Shively
Deena - Dorothea Harahan
Jessica - Laurie Naughton
Jason - Gino Anthony Pesì



'Brownstone'

Three simultaneous tales of career and commitment, love and loss share the parquet flooring of writer-helmer Catherine Butterfield's "Brownstone," a world premiere at the commissioning Laguna Playhouse. Intimate triple two-hander boasts enough intriguing characters and plot twists to satisfy a narrative-hungry audience, and should have a long and even happier life when mounted with greater finesse, in a setting more congenial to its delicate charms than the Playhouse's cavernous mainstage.

In an Alan Ayckbourn-like conceit, the second floor of a Manhattan townhouse plays host to stories beginning respectively in 1937, 1978 and 2000 and extending a year or two later. Earliest plot, inspired by if not directly lifted from such Philip Barry works as "The Philadelphia Story," pits a spoiled papa's-girl heiress (Deborah Puette, so channeling Katharine Hepburn you keep expecting to hear about calla lilies in bloom) against an idealistic newspaperman (Brian Rohan in affable Jimmy Stewart mode). Brittle repartee gets them through family conflict and their own uncertainty of purpose, with plans to decamp for the Parisian bohemian life a la Barry's "Holiday" inconveniently interrupted by Hitler.

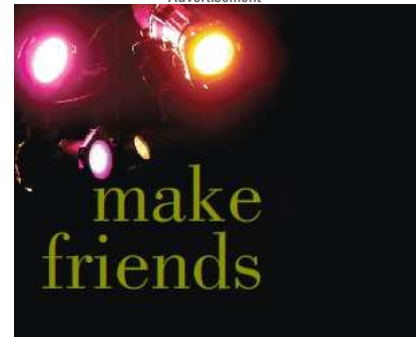
Four decades on, the floor is rented by a pair of aspiring actresses, one (Kim Shively) poor and ambitious, the other (Dorothea Harahan) wealthy and delusional. In this evidently autobiographical plot, Fortune's wheel alternately revolves well and ill for the roommates in their battles with familiar Big City temptations (the casting couch) and perils (urban paranoia).

Meanwhile, a yuppie couple in the year 2000 struggles to have it all. Ad exec Jessica (Laurie Naughton) is torn between romance and vocation, while broker Jason (Gino Anthony Pesì) is torn between romance and laptop. (His announcement "Bush won Florida; once they face that, we can get down to business" is meant to signal what a jerk he is.)

Interconnections are gradually revealed among the three narratives, spinning out in predictable but absorbing ways and intersecting with real-life events it'd be unfair to reveal (and unnecessary, since you can see them coming some distance away). Talented thespians expand and deepen their characterizations throughout, notably Naughton's gradual realization of where Jessica's true priorities lie, and Harahan's impressively detailed descent into schizophrenia.

But helmer Butterfield disservices playwright Butterfield through excessive literalness. Endless clunky blackouts, inserted to roll furniture-laden platforms on and off, break the rhythm while affording too much opportunity to anticipate what's coming next. A few stylized overlapping sequences hint at the fluidity that might have emerged had Butterfield specified a simple unit set of furniture, as Ayckbourn does in his multilayered theater pieces, and trusted Julie Keen's keen costumes to convey period throughout. (You won't soon forget Puette's stunning white satin wedding-reception gown.)

At the same time, Lauren Helpen's set is far too wide and deep for play's intimacies. The vast walls lack elegance and definition, and Butterfield is forced to have her cast run relays and shout confidences across uncomfortable distances to fill the space. At many 99-seat venues, a play is far too big for the room; in its current incarnation, "Brownstone" is certainly a case of vice versa.



Q If you could meet one person in the entertainment industry, who would it be?

A. Harry - Tyler Perry

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