

'How I Learned to Drive' examines abuse, pedophilia

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Staff and submitted reports



MORGANTOWN — This weekend and next, M.T. Pockets Theatre will present a production of Paula Vogel's 1998 Pulitzer Prize-winning play, "How I Learned to Drive."

Set in the 1960s and '70s, the play tells the story of a young woman, Li'l Bit, portrayed from ages 11 to 30, who is given driving lessons by her 40-something uncle by marriage. Throughout the production, Li'l Bit attempts to come to terms with the sexually abusive relationship, which lasts for seven years.

Director and regular M.T. Pockets' member Tawnya Drake does not shy away from the play's dark subject matter, which deals with pedophilia and misogyny. In fact, she chose it for that reason.

"This show will make people uncomfortable, and that's why I love it," she said. "We have to discuss the uncomfortable to be able to grow. We have to discuss (it) because silence isn't doing the trick."

In addition to Li'l Bit (Nora Perone) and Uncle Peck (Jim Stacy), a Greek Chorus — made up of Joy Carr, Adam Messenger and Chris Adducchio — helps the story unfold. The actors also play a host of other characters.

The script is a memory play, told largely out of chronological order.

Carr points out that while “How I Learned to Drive” examines tough topics, it’s also a play about growth and forgiveness, and there are moments of levity.

“You’re going to laugh, I mean really laugh,” Even though, she said, you may, “love and hate that you’re laughing.”

Perone — who plays the central role, as a girl and young woman — is a Morgantown native and professional actress.

She earned her master’s degree in acting in London, where she went on to perform, teach private lessons and college classes, and help write and produce original material.

Perone has temporarily returned this summer, to find herself tackling one of the most challenging, and widely renowned, roles of her career.

“When I found out I’d been cast, I was kind of terrified,” Perone said. “I studied this play in my dramatic literature classes at WVU.”

The play premiered in 1997, off-Broadway at the Vineyard Theatre. Mary-Louise Parker (Li’l Bit), David Morse (Uncle Peck) and Michael Showalter (Greek Chorus member) were among the cast members.

Perone credits director Drake and the cast for being, “so supportive that I’ve had a great time in rehearsals. I feel really privileged to be a part of telling Li’l Bit’s story.”

She added that now is an ideal time to explore the subject matter of “How I Learned to Drive.”

“I can’t think of a better time for this 20-year-old play to be revived than in the midst of the ‘Me Too’ movement, when we’re finally starting to have long-overdue conversations about exploitation and abuses of power,” Perone said. “What makes it both important, and really riveting theater, is that unlike many such conversations, which tend remain in the extreme black and white, ‘How I Learned to Drive’ delves deeply into the gray areas.”

Adducchio voices a grandmother — who, in Adducchio’s words, “makes the same arguments (about how girls should approach sex) as I heard from some women in my life,” — and an 11-year-old victim, whose cry of,

“ ‘Please don’t do this Uncle Peck,’ ” he said is, “speaking for every victim of abuse who ever asked their predator to stop.”

“I cry in my heart when I say that line.”

Carr also carries some of her character’s lines with her.

“Aunt Mary (Uncle Peck’s wife) wants a happy marriage and what she refers to as ‘a well-ordered living room’ above all things,” she said. “It makes me question how much we might excuse what is happening under our own roof in the name of ‘family is family,’ or turn a blind

eye to it out of fear of public embarrassment.”

Stacy expresses his own view of the contradiction at the heart of the play.

“My character does things that will absolutely make the audience hate him,” he said. “And yet, I have never appeared in anything that I wanted people to see more.

“That’s because the play itself, and everyone involved in this production, have combined to make something wonderful. Something that is sad, funny, scary, hopeful and deeply human.”

“How I Learned to Drive” is set for 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday and July 26-28, and 2 p.m. Sunday at M.T. Pockets Theatre, at 203 Parsons St. Tickets range \$15 for adults, \$13 for seniors/military and \$10 for students. They are available at mtpocketstheatre.com. Reservations can be made by calling 304-284-0049 and leaving a message. Tickets can also be purchased at the door, when seating is available. Advance ticket purchases are strongly recommended. Free parking is available in the lower lot off Charles Avenue. The play is recommended for mature audiences.