



Regional

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A Place At Forest Lawn

(Arvada Center, Main Stage, Denver; 487 Seats; \$42 Top)

An Arvada Center for the Arts & Humanities presentation of a play in two acts by Luke Yankee and James Bontempo, based on the one-act play by Lorees Yerby. Directed by Terry Dodd.

Clara Olsen - Judy Phelan-Hill
Gertrude Wynant - Patty Mintz Figel
Albert Hogobarth - William Denis
Father Gabriel - Josh Gaffga
[Jack Olsen](#) - Marcus Waterman
Sonny - Jordan Leigh

By **BOB BOWS**

As one ages, priorities and perspectives change. At such a time, with thoughts moving from the moment to the eternal, we find retired entertainment industry buddies Clara, Gertrude and Albert at the Forest Lawn Rest Home in Hollywood -- where their past secrets inform their present denial.

If Luke Yankee and James Bontempo's script for "A Place at Forest Lawn" (winner of the 2003 New Noises Playwriting Award and a 2004 Palm Springs Intl. Playwrights Festival Finalist) seems slow-paced, that's because the still cantankerous and kicking residents of this upscale rest stop on the highway to kingdom come are painfully aware that the next leg of their journey is the last; yet there's plenty of humor at the gallows.

With some minor exceptions, director Terry Dodd deftly navigates his seasoned cast through the script's bombshells and minefields. Like the proverbial gun onstage, a stainless steel casket at the opening curtain sets the tone for what's to come: While Clara (Judy Phelan-Hill), Gertrude (Patty Mintz Figel) and Albert (William Denis) debate the merits of the latest funeral service by the local new-age Catholic priest, not far off Clara's long-absent son, Jack (Marcus Waterman), is on his way to the site, expecting to find his mother dead after receiving a bill for a \$75,000 mausoleum.

As the formidable and hard-boiled Clara, Phelan-Hill is masterfully understated, delivering her punchlines, both sarcastic and solemn, with timely effect. Clara's best friend, Gertrude, develops from fastidious eccentric to forgiving saint in Mintz Figel's finely-tuned performance.

When cell phone- and Blackberry-laden Jack arrives expecting to hear the bad news from his "Aunt" Gertrude and instead finds his mother alive, the plot kicks in, and the well-guarded secrets that change each character's relationship with the others are gradually revealed.

Reacting to Clara's steady stream of revelations, Waterman, as the live-wire son, provides all the infusion of contempo commercial compulsiveness that the drama needs to make us appreciate the deliberations of the geriatric mind.

The contrast between Jack and his two boomer contemporaries -- the rest home's van driver and Walkman-adorned stoner from LaLa Land, Sonny (Jordan Leigh), and the Aquarian-minded priest who gets no respect, Father Gabriel (Josh Gaffga) -- raises compelling questions around the definition of meaningful work and offers a telling counterpoint to the misleading self-images nurtured by the old folks.

The truth-saying fool in this mix is the man of a thousand faces, Leigh, who fits Sonny like a glove -- whether rolling a joint while schlepping his senior charges on the freeway, giving advice to all in need of chilling out or providing compassion and pharmaceuticals for his elderly friends.

With obvious relish, Denis plays the former actor Albert, whose embellishments of romances with starlets and dinner parties with studio bosses would put Barrymore to shame. Eyes sparkling as he regales us, Denis is every bit the smoking-jacket-clad, cane-tapping former matinee idol Albert has made himself out to be.

Gaffga transfigures Father Gabriel from a fresh-faced novice who releases balloons at funerals (symbolizing the departing spirit) to a confidant worthy of his frock.

Yankee and Bontempo cleverly interweave a slew of issues around death and dying with a cohesive dramatic arc between mother, son and best friend, producing a tapestry in which forgiveness brings a final peace.

Set, Joseph J. Egan; costumes, Nicole M. Harrison-Hoof; lighting, Gail J. Gober; sound, Steve Stevens; production stage manager, Connie I. Lane. Opened Oct. 18, 2005. Reviewed Oct. 20. Running time: 2 HOURS, 15 MIN.

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