

A Place at Forest Lawn

Reviewed by Holly Bartges

Brazen, outspoken, hiding vulnerability, guarding a secret, harboring animosity, one of Denver's top actor's, Judy Phelan-Hill opens the play as Clara Olsen, scrutinizing a casket at a viewing. He lived at the same Hollywood Rest Home where she lives, but she can't remember his name. It doesn't matter. Clara has no hesitation to tell him what she thinks about him or his expensive casket.

The Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities deserves high kudos for taking a courageous lunge in producing Luke Yankee and James Bontempo's controversial play *A Place At Forest Lawn*. Based on a one-act play by Lorees Yerby, *Forest Lawn* flirts with life at Hollywood, California's Forest Lawn Rest Home with innocent observation, boasting of a life that never happened, caustic humor meant as unbridled personal truth rather than funny to be funny, dueling swords between a mother and son, dyed in the wool loyalty between long time friends, and the decision to end pain in finality when tolerance for pain has exceeded its limit.



From L to R: **Patty Mintz Figel (Gertrude)**, **William Denis (Albert)** and **Judy Phelan-Hill (Clara)** in the world premiere of *A Place at Forest Lawn* at the Arvada Center.

Photo: P. Switzer

Someone should send a video version to Dr. Jack Kevorkian who championed doctor-assisted suicide for individuals when quality of life deteriorated to near vegetable status, or when tolerance for pain exceeded its limit. Clara Olsen would have had a great deal to say to him. Although Clara didn't need a doctor, didn't want a doctor. All she needed was Sonny, (Jordan Leigh) a once upon a time Harvard graduate, who is now very happy remaining high most of the time and driving old people on their errands. In sloppy raggle taggle clothes, Sonny hands out down to earth philosophies clothed in comfort, exercising no judgment on off the wall conclusions by people who have lived a very long time. Leigh stands out high, wide and, well, maybe not so handsome in this role. He does stand out high and wide with artistic expertise in bold cryptic letters.

Director Terry Dodd punctuated the best in a tight, magnificent cast on an awesome set designed by Joseph J. Egan. The stage supports an elegant entry to *Forest Lawn*, with a glimpse of lush manicured garden just outside, a portion of the dining hall, a simple but elegant apartment for Clara that peeks into her kitchen and her bedroom, and three areas at the foot of the stage to cover various times and places. If the cast were less than the quality it is. Gail J. Gober's lighting design at the top of the stage capturing the colorful changing light and colors of the sky would be a scene-stealer. Against the row of palm trees, the sky takes on a personality of its own, reflecting moods it can only sense as pink, white, and blue constantly change their hue on the color scale. There is a gorgeous California realness taking the breath away, just as the characters reveal and hide their decisions, emotions, wanting's, and needs.

Location

Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities:
6901 Wadsworth Blvd.; Arvada, Colorado

When

Tuesday-Saturday, 7:30 PM; Wednesday 1:00 PM; Sunday matinee: 2:00 PM; Audio-described performance and Talk-Back with cast and production team follows Wednesday, November 2 performance

Dates

Now showing through November 13, 2005

Tickets

\$32.00-\$42.00

Reservations

(720) 898-7200 or www.arvadacenter.org

To get her son's attention, Clara sends her son Jack the bill for a \$75,000.00 mausoleum she thinks he should pay. Marcus Waterman explodes onto the stage at the entry to the rest home wearing his corporate business suit, and corporate demeanor. He thinks Clara has already died. Waterman plays Jack to the hilt. He would have come into the rest home with both arms swinging, except for the cell phone glued to right hand and ear.

Brought up short by an old man sitting at the entrance in silence, Albert Hogobarth tells Jack that Clara is the woman of his dreams. When he was a big star on the Hollywood lot and Clara worked in the make-up department, she was the loveliest girl he had ever met. To learn his mother is alive and that she is being described as lovely sends Jack into hyper shock. William Denis brings Albert to life with his bumbling words and fantasy re-enactment of roles he never played.

Neither Jack nor Clara mince words diced with wit and humor designed to cut and protect themselves from a secret hurtful past.

Sweet, innocent, naïve, or so she wants those around her to believe, Patty Mintz Figel gives Gertrude Wynant, Clara's long time best friend, heart, soul, and tickling delicious sense of humor. Figel winds her in a ditzzy robe of treading softly through the tulips. Until. Until she responds to the green wet behind the ears insufficient young priest, Father Gabriel. Clara calls him Gabe letting him know in no uncertain terms he has to earn the right to be called Father.

Offering a volunteer program to give the residence the pretense of doing something useful, Gertrude grabs at the opportunity, quickly becoming disillusioned over having to alphabetize files. She doesn't care what Gabe says. She knows she has more to give than just flat attention to files.

Josh Gaffga fills the robes of Father Gabriel with inexperience, good intentions not thought through, flaunting superficial balloons, book learning mental cloaks that are way too big for him to get his mind around, until he admits an honest I don't know to Clara. His honest I don't know grows him in mind, body and spirit. Gaffga gives that to him and then some.

Secrets are guarded, revealed, Jack and Clara play darts with the eyes and sharpened hurt angry phrases, that always ends up in a smile from playful words. Clara discovers Gertrude held hidden wisdom and tolerance because of a truth she held close. "Love is hard to find. You take it when you can get it." This is the same woman who had a hissy fit because gravy ran into her green beans.

Although the sight of Sonny turns Jack on his head, it is Sonny who has an unsettling way of finding the crack in Jack's façade. Surprises appear from every corner of the stage, as the six characters are rattled, shaken loose, closed down, split wide-open, pieced back together with biting words, sliced humor, gentility, loyalty, and love.

Guaranteed to spark discussion, as well it should; guaranteed to stretch some minds and imaginations, as well it should; the characters won't soon be forgotten, with their brisk humor, and honesty that walks hand in hand with misunderstood deception, empowered with artistic expertise.

Forest Lawn is one pungent compelling production that will have you smiling, and laughing while your brain is saying "Whoa, let's run that by one more time." It speaks truth from a woman who knows her truth even in her fear. It matters very little to her whether anyone agrees or disagrees. It's her life, her decision, and her pain she can no longer tolerate.