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'Drive' steers audience into dark territory

By D. A. Blackburn

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Incest, molestation and pedophilia are subjects that tend to make people recoil in horror, but the University Detroit Mercy Theatre Company's latest production, "How I learned To Drive," puts them squarely at the forefront of its drama, and the result is a thought-provoking production, well worth a look.

The script by respected playwright Paula Vogel received a Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1998, and has since become her most widely performed work. It is an exceptionally candid look at the complexities of family dynamics, focusing as much attention on the enablers of abuse as it does on the acts of molestation themselves. Moreover, it vilifies everyone in proportion - including the victim herself.

The Theatre Company production excels specifically for its excellent casting. As Li'l Bit, the adolescent protagonist, Susan Boonenberg is an ideal fit, both physically and dramatically. She provides a perfect mix of adult beauty and youthful naivete, and she is gracefully able to convey the duality of her character - that of a victim with deep emotional scars, and that of the fatherless child longing for the affections of her abuser.

As the play's foremost villain, Uncle Peck, Andrew Huff exudes a sly Southern charm, and brings the character to life as a likable, even admirable, soul. Huff makes it easy to see why Li'l Bit is drawn to Peck, which is critical to the drama, and the work succeeds on the credibility of his portrayal.

On the periphery, Mary Bremer, Cynthia Szczesny and Anne Dilorio all give solid showings, each performing with conviction and understanding as the enablers of sexual abuse. As Grandpa, Joel Frazee creates the right voice and look for his character, but stumbles slightly, in giving the aged man a youthful movement about the stage.

The Theatre Company's production is a fine execution of a very complicated work. It is provocative, without being titillating, and succeeds in conveying Vogel's humor amidst the weighty material of an ugly subject.

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'How I learned To Drive'

UDM Theatre Company, Marygrove Theatre, 8425 W. McNichols Rd., Detroit. Fri.-Sun., through Nov. 30. Tickets: \$13-\$15. For information: 313-993-3270 or <http://theatre.udmercy.edu>.

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