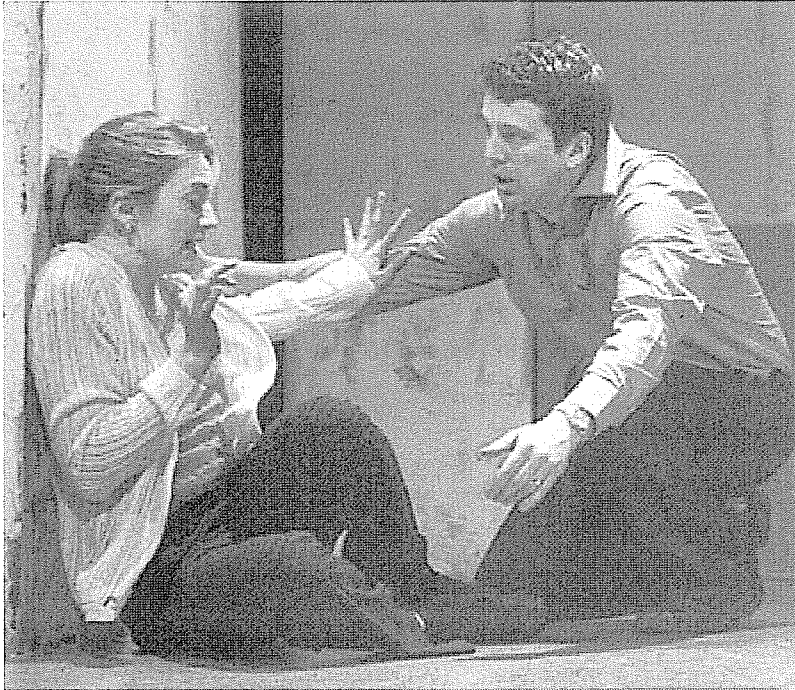


What's New in Princeton & Central New Jersey?

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Theater Review: 'Instructions for Breathing'

by Jonathan Elliott



Heidi Schreck and Bryan Close. Photo: Cie Stroud

There are just those things in life you don't talk about, things that are so shattering or altering that they can't help but drag you into a pit of doubt and loss and spiraling misery. And stories about these events tend to take on aspects of artificial redemption at best and disingenuousness at worst, as the unavoidable despair of the subject matter takes hold of the work and refuses to let go.

It is for its willful, bold defiance in the face of all of the above that Passage Theater's production of "Instructions for Breathing," by Caridad Svich, is such a noteworthy and fascinating piece of theater. It starts with the premise of unthinkable tragedy — the disappearance of a young child — and plunges into a world of suburban norms, mores, and faux pas, where friends and neighbors scramble desperately towards an imagined center of calm and normalcy while trying to cope with the epic shift that pulls them so very far away from it.

"Instructions for Breathing" wastes no time in cutting to the heart of the matter — in the first scene, Jon and Sara (Bryan Close and Heidi Schreck) explode in panic as their young daughter Sonya vanishes. And while this generates the heartbreak, uncertainty, and pathos you'd expect from such an event, the play zigs when you expect it to zag. It is less about the hunt for Sonya and more about what happens when an idyllic suburban life is shattered. The way Jon and Sara's community perceives them changes drastically, as they transform from "normal" 30-something parents into something "other." All their friends can now see are parents who lost their child. It becomes their defining characteristic, and it opens up some gripping and disquieting parallels — Sara's childless friend (Polly Lee) can't help but fumble over her words as she grasps at something, anything, to restore a sense of normalcy

to life, even as she justifies her own "otherness" at not having children by rationalizing her relationship to her dogs. It's a genuinely funny and human moment of exchange between these two women that hits the point of this poetic story home — we're all normal and comfortable until we're perceived as missing a piece of the puzzle, and we spend the rest of our lives in an attempt to reclaim or regenerate that piece.

Svich's play is at its best when it veers off from the gut-wrenching solidity of the "real world" and into a more lyrical, dreamlike place that underscores the sense of confusion and palpable loss. Director Daniela Topol's deft and nuanced directing doesn't miss a beat of these shifts; ethereal voiceovers give way to moments in which we're both inside Jon and Sara's heads and their living room, as they cling to the slipping hope of finding their daughter and, as time passes, the less tangible need to continue referring to her in the present tense.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention Jeffrey Van Velsor's excellent set design. It's divided into two zones, one representing all areas of the real world (from home, to the office, to a park, to Gibraltar and beyond) and another that recreates the dreamspace of Jon and Sara. The real world is constructed in all matte whites, with d-shaped blocks reassembled continually and seamlessly to transform into various locales. It feels like we're living on the inside of an iPod, all clean lines, everything in its place, pristine and sterile. The dreamspace area, in contrast, is all dark woods and natural light, a place far less organized and far more real. The two "zones" are bound together by a beautiful blue canvas painting, separated into two parts. It's a gorgeous and elegant design that interacts with and enhances the artistry of the fine performances.

Ultimately, "Instructions for Breathing" is a story of filling the voids in our lives that come up in the course of living; some characters pursue wealth, or dogs, or bad jokes, or ephemeral friendships — anything to provide meaning and a sense of normalcy. It's not a play about the mystery of the loss of a child. Family friend Don (Gerardo Rodriguez) muses about the Greek tragedy aspect of the events, and a late appearance by the wonderful Kate Hopkins teases at this element. Svich provides numerous clues as to this mystery's resolution, but the mystery survives the play while leaving us to provide the connective tissue between the clues provided. Moreover, this is a play about survival and recovery from loss, and how we rediscover ourselves and each other as the parts of our lives rearrange to compensate.

And for those of you who want a spoiler alert about the lost Sonya, you won't find one here. While part of me wanted that resolution, part of me felt some peace in that it wasn't really the point — whether or not Sonya is found, life has to be lived.

I have to say, Passage is doing work that feels like nothing else you'll see on New Jersey stages. It is intimate, passionate, and built to inspire and interact with daily life on a constant basis. Artistic Director June Ballinger has created something incredible in Mill Hill.

"Instructions for Breathing," Passage Theater, through Sunday, May 10. Mill Hill Playhouse, Front and Montgomery streets, Trenton, Drama about a tragedy focusing on a couple after the loss of their child. \$25 to \$30. 609-392-0766 or www.passagetheatre.org.