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The Lowe Down: Can Vermont Theater Ever Embrace the Cutting Edge?

By Jim Lowe

Two new plays confronting some of today's tough issues are opening this week in productions by top Vermont theaters.

Terrence McNally's intimate and searing drama dealing with the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic, "Mothers and Sons," opens in a Vermont Stage production Wednesday at Burlington's FlynnSpace. And Northern Stage is premiering Marisa Smith's take-no-prisoners contemporary comedy "Mad Love" beginning Thursday at its new theater in White River Junction.

Both plays are cutting-edge in terms of subject matter — yet entirely traditional as theater.

"Mother and Sons" deals with the intense dynamics that occur when a married male couple, parenting a son, is confronted by the mother of one's former lover. It isn't pretty, but it is compelling.

Much lighter is "Mad Love," in which two millennials are prevented from committing because their relationship is a casual "hookup." Quite funny, it is also disconcerting in its accuracy.

Both plays confront contemporary issues, but the storytelling is concrete and traditional, albeit skillful and effective. They take the art form no further than "Death of a Salesman" — and that describes most theater produced in Vermont.

Don't get me wrong, it's wonderful theater, and I love it, but it doesn't challenge theater as an art form. Most of Vermont's top professional companies would love to present more challenging theater, but they simply cannot afford the financial risk. Their overhead is too high.

In fact, the only place Vermonters can see truly cutting-edge theater on a regular basis is Off Center for the Dramatic Arts in Burlington's Old North End. Created by local theater professionals in 2010, this rudimentary 50-seat black box playhouse offers the opportunity for theater folk to experiment — with much less financial risk.

The Off Center doesn't produce theater, rather it co-presents with small theater companies. This season is devoted entirely to new plays and, not surprisingly, the quality is hardly consistent — but it's nearly always intriguing.

One of the successes was sometimes-Vermont playwright Maura Campbell's "Fantasia de Colores," a surreal "trip" by a mother and daughter from their conservative Iowa home to the debaucheries of Mexican Carnival and back. The storytelling is made up of fleeting vignettes, often disjointed and some seemingly irrelevant, but together they created a mosaic. The story is more of an impression.

The production was by the Jericho-based Theatre Mosaic Mond, founded and directed by Georgette Garbés Putzel in 2009. Its motto is, appropriately, "Life is a mosaic; diversity is essential."

The Off Center is also a theater that's not afraid to make you squirm. Last season's "Screwed," a reprisal of Burlington



(from left) Tracey Girdich, Tobin Jordan, Aaron Masi, and Alex Dostie in *Screwed* by Stephen Goldberg at Off Center. Photo: Jim Lowe

playwright Stephen Goldberg's 1997 tragicomedy. Goldberg's plays celebrate the underbelly of life. Hardly romanticizing their seedy situations, they distill emotions to their rawest and most real — thus revealing their universality. And there's always just a touch of hope.

The stuff of Broadway? Hardly. But we are indeed fortunate to have the Off Center in Burlington. But what about the rest of the state?

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