

Review: Mother, son face their issues in 'Velocity of Autumn'

John Monaghan, Special to the Detroit Free Press 12:10 a.m. EST December 9, 2015



(Photo: Matrix Theatre)

"One mother. One son. 100 Molotov cocktails." That was one of the tag lines attached to "The Velocity of Autumn" during its brief Broadway run in 2014. The play isn't nearly as incendiary as the ad pitch, but it does plenty to ignite an audience's mind about topics like art, aging, memory and modern families, especially those dealing with an elderly parent.

Alexandra (Jane MacFarlane) is a 79-year-old resident of the Park Slope neighborhood in Brooklyn. Her children want her to enter an assisted-living facility, but she has other ideas. Fortified with furniture in front of the doors and armed with jars of her late husband's highly flammable photographic chemicals, she vows she'll burn her brownstone to the ground if they try to force her to vacate it.

She especially doesn't want to leave the tree outside her window, which has grown strong and adapted as she has grown old and faced the indignities of old age. Health, she says, is defined not by how you feel when you go to bed but by what's left of you when you get up in the morning.

Alexandra is a painter of some renown who spent the first third of her life roaming about before marrying and raising three children. Now one of her offspring, Chris (Chris Korte), has been handed the task of bringing her out of her brownstone alive. He makes a memorable entrance by climbing through the only window that he knows will be open — the one that allows Alexandra to see and smell her beloved tree.

The mother-son reunion is chilly at first, especially because Chris has made so few visits home. Soon, though, you realize that he is Alexandra's favorite or, at the least, he's the child who is most like her. Like Mom, Chris has a wanderlust and possesses an artist's eccentric view of the world.

Director David Wolber is right at home with this material, and he has mounted this production with the professionalism and economy he brought to shows when he was artistic director of Ann Arbor's Performance Network. He is definitely an asset to the Matrix, the tiny black-box theater in southwest Detroit that's celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

The first time I saw MacFarlane perform was in the Ringwald's production of "August: Osage County." She portrayed drug-addicted matriarch Violet Weston, a role played by Estelle Parsons on Broadway. Interestingly, Parsons also originated the role of Alexandra in the Broadway staging of "Velocity of Autumn," and critics noted that her wit and vitality were at odds with the dire situations that forced her character to move about.

Wolber and company combat this problem by placing Alexandra in a wheelchair and playing up her faulty memory. As she searches and stammers for the right word, she notes that nouns are the first things to go with old age. That she made this observation at all only supports the notion that she is sharper than most of us on our best days.

Korte's Chris has his own issues, some stemming from an awkward childhood. He's gay, but Alexandra says she never had a problem with his sexuality. His father did, however, or at least had a dislike for it. Alexandra likens it to the man's distaste for Gorgonzola cheese.

The set design has all of the elements required by Eric Coble's script, including bookcases, a stack of records, rectangular traces on the walls where Alexandra's paintings once hung and golden tree leaves just outside the window. When that window is open, sound designer Neil Koivu provides an urban symphony of honking car horns and police sirens.

Running 90 minutes without intermission, "The Velocity of Autumn" starts in a panic but then settles into a meaningful, memorable conversation between two kindred spirits who just happen to be related. They are worth spending time with.

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'The Velocity of Autumn'

Three stars

out of four stars

8 p.m. Fri.-Sat., 3 p.m. Sun. Ends Sunday.

Matrix Theatre Company

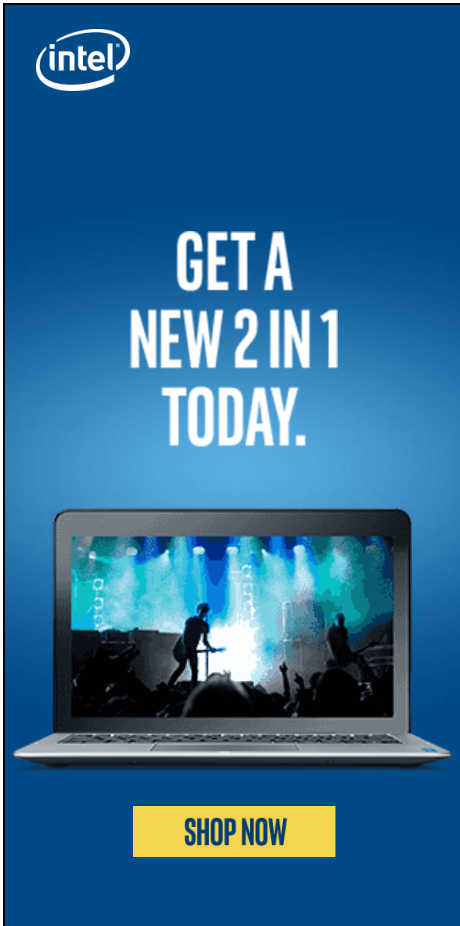
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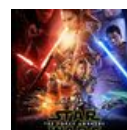


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