

SHADOW BOX; AN EXERCISE IN LIVING TO DIE

The reality that none of us will get out of this alive is rarely dealt with dead on unless you are the one doing it. We approach our demise with gallows humor or indirectly as the notion of our death is by nature rather inconceivable. Our communal confession is expressed in the profound and pithy comment of Woody Allen; "I really don't mind dying, I just want to be there when it happens

The Shadow Box is an uncommonly performed 1970's Tony and Pulitzer winning play spawned in the torrent of interest released by the watershed 1969 research of psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler Ross. She proposed five stages of grief we process through after learning of impending death. The impact of her research was underscored by the near simultaneous emergence from Britain of the concept of Hospice under the tutelage of Dame Cicely Saunders.

Although death is timeless, the Shadow Box is largely a period piece. During the thirty years since its release, wonderful work in the field of medical eschatology (end of life issues), AIDS, theatrical works such "Angels in America" and numerous performance artists dramatically raised our awareness. We now know that the five stages of grief are not rules, checkpoints or sequential, but are tools we recognize to help us cope.

"The Shadow Box", as the first major work to address Dr Ross's concepts, focuses on the lives and families of three people with terminal diagnoses living in a hospice setting who struggle to come to a conclusion about their existence. It is an exercise in living to die.

The script is rich in pithy quips and weighty quagmires of tumultuous thoughts. Director George Maguire cleverly presents it in a dioramic fishbowl utilizing alternating dramatic vignettes on a superb single set by Kate Boyd. Family units struggle in their individual hospice cottages which are perfectly lit in dappled thought-shadows designed by Michael Palumbo. The set declares that death is not a subject to be kept hidden like an embarrassing relative. Although the music is at times either too loud or simply too dour and melodically unforgiving and not helpful, the script aptly orchestrates the characters through painful experiences where the grist of the melody of life lies.

The scaffolding upon which Maguire has each of these characters splay out the tails of the waning comets of their lives is clever and utilizes not so apparent interviewers. Soon, the audience is in the fishbowl as well.

Joe, played by Michael Lie Murphy, is a blue collar 'New Joisey' guy well adjusted to his fate. His wife Maggie, played by Glenda G. Zahhradka, so fears losing him that she won't enter his cottage; to her it is his coffin. Brian, played by John Greer, is a bisexual academic intent on talking himself to death using his words as swords to parry and fend away his terror as his lover Mark, played by Stephen Baumann cares for him. The flamboyant, clichéd ex wife Beverly, played at times quite on target by Morgan Frazer, unexpectedly visits and her trashiness both illuminates and inflames all.

Showing her professional Actors Equity chops, Solano's Actors Training Program Conservatory Director Carla Spindt is Felicity, whose comportment is a superb living antonym to her name. This elderly, cantankerous, conveniently episodically senile goat stays off her considerable pain and death, much to the burden of her long suffering less favored daughter Agnes played by Gabrielle Santos, by being buoyed by the delusion that the long dead favored daughter Claire shall soon return.

The play has dramatic contrivances and is dated. In addition, actors who have not had cancer, been threatened with the realistic notion of their own demise or are simply young will understandably struggle with the at times overwrought script which occasionally assumes the pedagogical role of an illustrated self help guide to dying.

Nonetheless, Shadow Box and its ensemble under the obviously careful direction of insightful George Maguire, solidly sends home some very worthwhile messages. Although ideally one wishes the dramatic presentation to partner equally with the script, the weightiness of the material and the strong script suffice to clearly illustrate how man wrestles with the visceral reality of a universally shared outcome. Understanding our mortality is crucial when we are dying to live.

I admire George Maguire for bringing this challenging play to our community. That is one of the hallmarks of strong artistic directors. They develop their conservatory while conserving an important vehicle for their audience's consciousness to wrap around a notion they can never escape- our own demise.

Three stars

Kevin Ryan is a retired Colonel, physician, musician and author who lives in Fairfield.