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Colin MacLean: The Pink Unicorn is a rich, impressive play

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Published:

February 23, 2015

Updated:

February 23, 2015 1:24 PM MST

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The Pink Unicorn is a play perfectly suited to Northern Light Theatre's season of gender questioning plays. It's a one-woman show, by Elise Forier Edie, that has played off-Broadway and in various Fringes.

Director Trevor Schmidt sets his show in a little girl's safe world of patchwork quilts and candy-apple trees.

Trisha (Louise Lambert) is a widow, raising her 14-year-old daughter in a small Texas town. She takes great comfort in her church and her pastor, works at a local hospital and is reasonably happy in the ordered life she has been given – when, suddenly, it is completely upended. Shortly before she starts high school, her daughter, Jolene, comes to her and says she wants to attend the school as a person without a gender. Trisha has no idea what she is talking about – her daughter might as well be telling her that she wants to start school as a warrior princess. To Trisha there are no transgendered (whatever that means) people in Texas. "I don't see gender anymore," says her daughter. "Whether somebody's a boy or a girl doesn't make any difference to me." And then comes the clincher, "And, by the way, I'm not a girl. Or anyway, I'm not all girl. I'm a boy too." Lacking any frame of reference, the bewildered Trisha can only grind out, "How can you be both a boy and a girl?"

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She later confides to us that, "we don't have what you might call 'diversity' in Texas" – so she turns to the internet to find out what has become of the "really cute little girl" who used to believe in a pink unicorn. "I want her to be happy and fulfilled and all that but I just want it to go away. I felt like she was going somewhere that I couldn't go." The pain in those words, in the hands of a fine actress and superb storyteller, reaches out across the stage to grip your heart.

And it's a pain that goes on and on, or as Trisha tells us, "It can't end and it won't go away." She is no mother goddess of great strength – just an ordinary Texas widow with a strong moral compass and a great deal of common sense. She loves her daughter with the buzz cut and goth outfit when she leaves for school in the morning. Trisha stumbles out of church when pastor Dick, using the Bible, compares sexual activists to Nazis. She runs afoul of a school superintendent who won't let her cross-dressing daughter have her picture taken for the yearbook – and who forbids the formation of a gay/straight alliance. Her genteel southern-belle mother is horrified.

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Trisha finds herself the unwilling head of a group suing the school. Her friends won't talk to her and she's getting horrid anonymous phone calls.

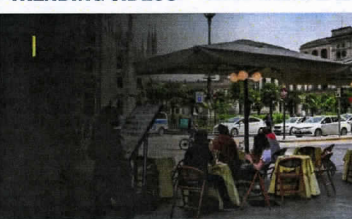
But any outline of the story in a short review can't possibly give you the richness and depth of Edie's play, Trevor Schmidt's sympathetic production and Lambert's compelling performance. Lambert speaks in a musical Texas accent and gives a series of sharply drawn impressions of the local folk. Her Trisha thinks of herself as "dumb," and sometimes she can't find the right words but in the final moments the words are there and the actress will bring tears to your eyes.

Five stars.

The Pink Unicorn, a production of Northern Light Theatre, plays in the PCL Studios of the ATB Financial Art Barns through February 28.

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