

'Under the Skin' scores with excellent acting, directing

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LEWISTON — “Under the Skin” is the kind of play that The Public Theatre does very well, and this production is another of those audience-pleasers with lots of laughs to punctuate its powerful life-or-death plotline.

The play’s four New York actors are outstanding in a production that revolves around the hospital bed of Lou Ziegler, who’s in desperate need of a kidney transplant.

He makes this soul-shattering appeal to his estranged adult daughter, Raina, who has only known her father as a totally irresponsible parent, and the request plunges her into an emotional whirlpool that tosses her from doubt to duty.

Lou is played by Douglas Rees, who makes his debut at The Public Theatre in this role. He played Lou in the world premiere of “Under the Skin” with the Arden Theatre Company in Philadelphia almost two years ago. The Public Theatre production is the New England premiere.

Annie Grier gives a powerful performance as Raina, who is conflicted at every turn as she tries to reach a decision. Lou is a master manipulator, and Raina resorts to compiling a list of pluses and minuses to help her decide if her father is “kidney-worthy.” Going on nothing but “a definite maybe,” Raina begins the medical evaluation process. Grier has appeared on stages from Toronto to Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Connecticut and New York. She is returning to The Public Theatre, where she played Belle/Fan in the 2015 production of “A Christmas Carol.”

Jon Hudson Odom plays Jarrell, a young African-American man, and Melissa Maxwell plays Marlene, Jarrell’s mother.

The hospital bed is center stage throughout the play, but the plot includes many other side-stage locations where “parenthetical” scenes are played for development of the story. There’s Raina’s front door, where early on, Lou makes an unexpected appearance. There’s a café, Marlene’s home and a number of scenes where one or more of the actors come right to the front of the stage and speak directly to the audience.

Odom’s portrayal of Jarrell is very well done. He and Raina meet in a café, and she learns that he also is undergoing evaluation for donation of a kidney to a hospital patient. Odom also has a brief role as Lou’s nurse.

Maxwell gives a standout performance in two significant roles and a couple of humorous appearances as a put-upon barista in the café. As Marlene, she is the play’s most grounded character — honest and insightful in her acceptance of life’s complexities. She also plays Dr. Badu, Lou’s physician. With speech tinged with a foreign accent, her manner is stern and by-the-book, but she reveals an ability to deal head-on with serious situations.

Odom and Maxwell have extensive theatrical credits.

“Under the Skin” was written by Michael Hollinger, who has written numerous plays, including “Red Herring,” which was produced by The Public Theatre in 2003. On his website, Hollinger writes, “Since art is based on life, which never retains the same mood for long, I believe a variety of tone is essential; that a little levity helps accentuate the gravity, and vice versa. Finding the proper balance of what I call “ha-ha-ouch” can be tricky, but also deeply rewarding.”

That viewpoint is evident throughout “Under the Skin.” In her direction of this play, Janet Mitchko guides an excellent cast through a fast-moving examination of some of life’s major challenges. Mitchko, The Public Theatre’s co-artistic director, assures that the audience recognizes an essential compassion in each character.

The show’s able crew consists of Lisa Bragdon, stage manager; Kit Mayer, set designer; Jonna Klaiber, costume designer; and Bart Garvey, lighting designer.



Jon Hudson Odom as Jarrell; Melissa Maxwell as Jarrell’s mother, Marlene; Douglas Rees as Lou Ziegler and Annie Grier as Raina, his daughter