

‘Marjorie Prime’

By Scott Andrews
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There’s a new kind of futuristic cyber ghost in Lewiston. It’s called a prime.

You have one more weekend to see this phenomenon. And not just one prime – three primes.

Let me explain. “Marjorie Prime” is the name of a play that’s currently running at The Public Theatre of Lewiston-Auburn. Written by Jordan Harrison, “Marjorie Prime” was a finalist for the 2015 Pulitzer Prize in Drama.

In Harrison’s imaginative world, a prime is a computer reproduction of a dead person. Using holographic and audio projections, linked with a computerized artificial intelligence, a prime is essentially a ghost – one you can talk with and interact with. That’s the dramatic conceit that underlies “Marjorie Prime.”

The play is set about 50 years in the future, but due to the protracted time span of its characters and their memories, key events in the story straddle the present.

It opens with 85-year-old Marjorie, in a nursing home and clearly at the end of her life, talking with the prime of her husband Walter, who died 10 years earlier. As Marjorie and Walter Prime converse, another quality of these cyber ghosts is revealed: They must be programmed. Walter looks like Walter once did, but he has no innate memory. Whatever information Walter Prime has about the real Walter was fed to him by Marjorie at some point.

And this information can be highly selective and even deceitful. That’s another key feature of “Marjorie Prime.”

There are two additional characters. Tess is the middle-aged daughter of Marjorie and Walter, plus there’s Jon, husband of Tess. The play takes place in three scenes. In the first, Marjorie, Tess and Jon are alive. In the second, Marjorie has died and Tess is having a difficult conversation with Marjorie Prime. Tess and Marjorie serve as the dramatic axis for this play. They are the only characters presented both alive and in their prime form.

In the third scene, Tess too has died, and Jon has to deal with three primes.

Harrison’s exposition is intentionally fractured. We learn about events in the lives of the characters through scraps, tidbits and twisted fragments of conversations, some in the present, some in the past. Sometimes we hear two quite different versions of the same story. This disconnectedness is deliberate, and reflects and relates to key themes in the play.

Harrison and his four characters explore a number of topics. What is real? What do people wish were real? What price are people willing to pay to manipulate and influence the answers to the first two questions? Can technology ever substitute for real people?

Director Chris Schario gets fine performances from his cast. The difficult, sometimes torturous conflict between Diane Findlay, as the title character, and Mhari Sandoval, as her daughter, provides the primary dramatic horsepower. Jackson Thompson, as Walter Prime, and Russell Bergeron, as Jon, represent foils and mirrors.

The Public Theatre of Lewiston-Auburn, 31 Maple St. in Lewiston, presents “Marjorie Prime” through March 25 with Thursday and Friday performances at 7:30 p.m., Saturday at 3 p.m. and 7:30 p.m., and Sunday at 2 p.m. Call 782-3200.