

'Marjorie Prime' compelling from beginning to end

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LEWISTON — What would life be like if we interacted with companions that are programmed with artificial intelligence? That's just one of the thought-provoking situations raised in The Public Theatre's current production of "Marjorie Prime." A very talented cast of four takes the audience through an exploration of memory, identity and the limits of what and who technology can replace.

Marjorie is portrayed by Diane Findley, a veteran of Broadway, Off-Broadway, national tours and regional theatre. Her performance is finely-tuned to navigate the complexities of a character somewhere between real and artificial ... not a robot, but an artificial intelligence program that uses sophisticated holographic projections.

It's a rather mind-twisting circumstance. Nevertheless, a captivating plot by author Jordan Harrison and concise direction by TPT's executive/artistic director Christopher Schario make this a compelling production from beginning to end.

Marjorie is an elderly lady who has a handsome new companion. He's a computerized replica of her deceased husband, Walter, played by Jackson Thompson, and he has returned as a "prime," in a younger representation of Marjorie's husband. Thompson's performance as a "prime" is sensitive and believable.

Thompson, appearing for the first time at The Public Theatre, has performed at venues throughout the United States. Some of his roles include "Hamlet," D'Artagnan in "The Three Musketeers" and Ethan in "Sex With Strangers."

The other two characters in the play are Tess, Marjorie's 55-year-old daughter, who is played by Mhari Sandoval, and her husband, Jon, played with sensitivity by Russell Berrigan.

Findley deftly draws the audience into Marjorie's haunting world of artificial intelligence. As their connections deepen, Marjorie and the members of her family develop somewhat differing accounts of their lives as they find they have one last chance to reconstruct the often-painful past.

Among Findley's numerous credits are "Fish in the Dark," "Hello Dolly" and "Tales of the City" on Broadway.

"Marjorie Prime" is science fiction at a satisfyingly humanistic and poignant level. It takes place in the not-too-distant future when an industry exists to reconstruct a loved one in holographic form.

Details of a reincarnation can be defined as wished, and Marjorie's attempt to bring Walter back is somewhat compromised by the necessity of providing a lot of detail. Marjorie's deteriorating health means her grasp of the past is less than perfect.

The play's plot has been summarized as the impression we leave on others, the details we remember, the stories we re-craft, the lies we tell ourselves and the love we are lucky to experience.



From left, Diane Findlay as Marjorie Prime; Mhari Sandoval as her daughter, Tess; Russell Berrigan as Tess's husband, Jon, and Jackson Thompson as the "prime" Walter, a young, handsome digital version of Marjorie's dead husband in a scene from "Marjorie Prime"

In “Marjorie Prime,” the audience is presented with a world where death doesn’t necessarily have to be the end. Marjorie’s daughter, Tess, is disturbed by the reincarnation of her father. As the family learns how to cope with their new/old visitor, they are forced to confront the past and also the future.

The play shifts freely between various appearances of “primes” that are called into existence by the grieving survivors of their human originals. While this play uses the appearance of “primes” on the stage, it’s implied that everywhere in everyone’s life there are “primes.” They could be family photo albums, recordings, or videotapes. It’s explained that the basic premise of “Marjorie Prime” is rooted in history and human nature. That is, we want to hold onto what we love, and if possible, to replicate it.

The play raises the question of whether “primes” are in any way people. Tess’s husband, Jon, wants to believe they are. He thinks that if enough memories of their deceased originals are fed into their data-banks, some kind of spontaneous generation will occur, creating a human presence. However, at the end, he learns that is not true.

Sandoval, in her first appearance in a production of The Public Theatre, delivers a fine performance as Tess. Berrigan’s portrayal of Jon, is sensitive and authentic.

Remaining performances of “Marjorie Prime” are at 7:30 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, March 22-25, with afternoon shows at 3 p.m. Saturday, March 24, and 2 p.m. Sunday, March 25.

Tickets are \$20 for adults, \$17 for groups, and \$5 ages 18 and under. For information and tickets call 207-782-3200 or go online to www.thepublictheatre.org. The Public Theatre is located at 31 Maple St., Lewiston.