

Theater review: The challenges of modern motherhood front and center in 'Paint Night'

By Steve Feeney
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Sisterhood rules in Carey Crim's latest work, which is having its world premiere at The Public in Lewiston.

Put five current moms and another woman who's expecting her first child together for a "girls' night out" and you have the makings of an engaging season opener for Lewiston's Public Theatre.

Carey Crim's "Paint Night," in its world premiere production, falls nicely within a genre of entertainment that blends broad, old-school naughty humor together with references to serious contemporary issues that personally trouble the strong women characters.

The occasion of the play is a gathering, part bridal shower, at an establishment that encourages "Creativity with a Cocktail." Each participant is provided with a drink, a blank canvas, brushes and paint and encouraged to express their amateur talents while a teacher gently guides them along.

In the process, the characters begin to unwind and vent about a long list of personal problems and festering grievances. All the issues are located in the many individual challenges they, as women, battle as they try to balance the ever-changing demands of parenthood and work while attempting to somehow keep a pretty picture of it all in their minds.

Director Janet Mitchko has assembled an experienced professional cast with impressive resumes. The half-dozen performers maintain a balance within a light-hearted sisterhood. But each character has some baggage that can't be completely put away for even one evening.

The play alternates rather quickly between emotional extremes. But the essential warmth and caring portrayed in the compelling individual and ensemble performances saves most of the tougher moments from going just a little too far over the top into melodrama.

Each performer is given ample time to shine. Kate Udall's Miriam initially appears to represent a particularly strong center until we learn the reasons she's really an "emotional wreck." Her trendy adult daughter Lolly, played by Jessica Mosher, effectively brings out her end of their divided relationship.

Susan Craves is the annoyingly inquisitive Fern, whose traditional values are under siege from free-spirit daughter Bree, played by Jessica DiGiovanni. The pair's differences come to a head in some touching, emotional scenes regarding Bree's young son.

Jeri Marshall's Gwen passionately raises multiple issues of bias in her life and particularly in her inability to return to the workforce. Jane Abernethy, as the art teacher, has her moments, as well, to reveal emotional scars.

The wide set by Kit Mayer offers plenty of space for the changing dynamics of character bonding. Anne Collins' costume designs feel age and class appropriate, and the lighting by Betty Faul-Welfare subtly colors it all. The production reaches a high level while not undermining the play's basic appeal.

Additional issues of religious tolerance, gender norms, transphobia, cellphone addiction, stifling disabilities, human composting and more all add to the very broad palette from which "Paint Night" works in presenting six women hoping to have a little fun while trying hard to picture a better life for themselves and those they love.



From left to right – Jessica DiGiovanni as Bree, Jeri Marshall as Gwen, Jane Abernethy as Vera, Susan Craves as Fern, Kate Udall as Miriam, and Jessica Mosher as Lolly