

A hilarious 'Incident' at Lewiston's Public Theatre

By Rob Tukey
SPECIAL TO THE SUN JOURNAL

Encore | Feb 1, 2024

Ready for some hilarious time travel? Then settle into your seat at The Public Theatre in Lewiston and allow yourself to be transported back to 1973 with playwright Katie Forgette's "Incident at Our Lady of Perpetual Help."

The trip begins immediately thanks to set designer Jennifer Madigan's stage work. A living room is furnished with an easy chair, end table and crocheted afghan. Behind this, on the side wall, what appear to be five small stained-glass windows loom inexplicably, for now. A flight of stairs partly hidden by an imposing brick wall delineates the small kitchen, which offers a table, wall phone, white porcelain Kelvinator and other appliances. In total, a vintage middle-class home from the '70s for sure. And to complete the feel: a soundtrack from the era that will have you tapping your toes.

The play opens, however, with one Linda O'Shea breezing onto the stage in current day 2024. She welcomes the audience directly.

Behind her are several individuals in low light. The lighting design by Florence Cooley will put Linda in a pool of light for her asides to the audience, darkening the rest of the scene as the other actors momentarily freeze. This device is employed throughout, evoking frequent audience responses and building momentum.

And away we go. Linda's comic monologue kicks off a rollicking and entertaining memory play featuring her recollections of the most turbulent day of her life back in 1973.

Besides Linda, then 19 years old, the principal characters in her "memory" of that memorable day's events are her family. And what a family. The O'Sheas are a multi-generational working-class Irish Catholic clan. There's the irascible auto mechanic father, Mike. The long-suffering mother, Jo, who has deferred her own career aspirations for the "joys" of housewifery. The pre-pubescent kid sister, Becky, who is enthralled with old private detective movies. The temporary house guest — Aunt Terri — who has separated from her husband because she feels underappreciated, neglected and disrespected in a world that is rapidly changing its attitudes toward women and their place in society. And, finally, a never seen but often heard bedridden grandmother barking orders and demanding attention.

It is fascinating how memories work. When the past is recounted, a fuzzy detail here or a little change there may make a big difference to a person. Because of this, Linda's family keeps interrupting, insisting on telling their side of her story. Everyone, it seems, wants a monologue.

Linda's recap of the 1970s to the audience conjures a different time: no Facebook, no tweets, no texting. A time when scandal and public ridicule were the supreme nightmare for those in a tight-knit Catholic parish. And whether or not you were brought up Catholic, you may recognize the angst of what Linda calls "Catholic guilt — also known as Jewish guilt, Methodist guilt, Baptist guilt, Lutheran guilt and atheist guilt."

When Linda's mother leaves it to Linda to tell Becky about the birds and the bees, Linda's description is a very bawdy and sarcastically hilarious account of the "wonderful mosaic women go through." Through a quirky



Back: Kelsey Petersen as Linda, Cate Damon as Josephine
Front: Allison Briner Dardenne as Theresa, Doug Rees as Mike, Scarlett Thomas as Becky

circumstance, the entire conversation between Linda and Becky comes to the ears of Father Lovett, the officious parish priest. And the Father is not amused. He sets out to confront the family about "the corruption of their eldest daughter's soul." From here, events fall like dominoes into a heap that Linda recalls as the most tumultuous day of her life. The stained-glass windows in the O'Shea living room help highlight each critical event.

Avoiding scandal and preserving the family reputation becomes the goal of all concerned. First, head-of-the-family Mike must be kept from learning of Father Lovett's impending visit. "Dad will kill me," laments Linda. Played in irresistible fashion by Doug Rees, Mike is not only kept in the dark but, hilariously in Linda's retelling, is called on to play both Father Lovett and Betty Heckenbach (a nosy parish busybody). His rapid rotation through these remarkable onstage performances garners passels of laughs even as the characters he plays bring alarm to the other family members.

Linda, played with wonderful charm and depth by Kelsey Petersen, remembers being in love and is filled with dreams of attending Stanford University next year to pursue a creative writing program and join her boyfriend there. Her culpability in creating the firestorm of family scandal is magnified by additional revelations that add to everyone's consternation.

Jo, the talented but stifled mother and housewife, is compellingly and lovingly embodied by Cate Damon. Jo has put aside her musical aspirations as a composer to sustain the duties of the housewife in support of husband and children. She is the bedrock of the family and the parish, working tirelessly and exhaustively for the good of the community. The wrath of Father Lovett would be untenable for her.

Thirteen-year-old kid sister Becky is infectiously and winningly played by Scarlett Thomas. Becky, naïve, spunky and a quick study, is a fan of classic movies. Clad in trench coat and fedora, she imagines herself as a junior version of private eyes Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade, cracking cases in films from the 1930s and '40s. Her eager conspiratorial willingness to help head off Father Lovett and Betty Heckenbach is a genuine treat filled with juvenile humor.

Allison Briner-Dardenne, as Mike's sister Aunt Terri, is outspokenly liberated and most likely a convert to the liberal ideas in such books as "The Feminine Mystique" and "Our Body, Our Selves." Her persistent demand for "a monologue" finally comes to fruition as she, herself, shares a "memory play" of her long history with Father Lovett, when they were schoolmates. And she plays a pivotal role in this layered tale.

"Incident at Our Lady of Perpetual Help" is a satisfying, laugh-a-second, touching production with a wonderful cast guided skillfully by director Janet Mitchko. Once again, The Public Theatre in Lewiston offers the gift of live theater that warms the heart, touches the soul and rouses the blood.