

Silverthorne Theater, Amherst, MA

The Cake by Bekah Brunstetter. Directed by Gina Kaufmann.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“Family. It’s a big word, it’s empty and it’s full at the same time.”

Comedy, as I’ve said many times, is a play where nobody dies. It’s got humor, though it may not be a laugh-riot. It entertains and sometimes it teaches us something about life, about people we probably know. Bekah Brunstetter’s comedy, “The Cake,” now on stage at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, produced by the Silverthorne Theatre Company, is a social comedy about real people in a real situation that exacerbates the concept of family. Jen, a young woman, has come home to get married and she wants her mother’s best friend, her own surrogate mother, to bake the wedding cake. Macy, her fiancé is with her. Della Brady, the baker, is thrilled until she realizes that Macy, a handsome, intelligent black woman, is Jen’s intended life partner. Her Christian soul doesn’t easily permit Della to condone a gay marriage and she makes an excuse to say “no.” That’s where this dark comedy begins.



Tahmie Der, Elizabeth Aspenlieder; Photo: Cat/Milo Keatinge Bezark

Where it goes you’ll never guess. Brunstetter uncovers the difficulties Della has in her own life: her husband has never been able to get her pregnant and she has wanted children as much as she has craved affection. She is slated to be a contestant on a nationally broadcast baking show. She wants to provide guidance to Jen but she cannot make her points without alienating the girl she has helped raise. And, to make things worse, she has daydreams about the TV show which become both sexually stimulating and emotionally abusive. Thank the Lord she has buttercream to sustain her through it all.

Elizabeth Aspenlieder plays Della with a southern accent as rich as the cakes Della bakes. She is genuine with the accent and with the kitchen skills and she handles the difficult emotions



Tahmie Der, Claudia Maurino;
Photo: Cat/Milo Keatinge Bezark

of her character with equal poise and grace. She doesn't push the comedy or parody of the character but plays with a genuineness that allows Della her hopes and dreams while granting her the gravity of her situations. Ignored by her husband Tim, played by Sam Samuels, she attempts a very non-Christian seduction in one of the play's funniest scenes. She handles the humor in this situation with a dramatic flair that gives it a special poignancy.

Tahmie Der plays Macy in a way that is especially realistic. She is a complex character with some very particular ideas about life and how it is to be lived. She does not give an inch when she can grab a mile. Jen is who she wants and who she intends to have. Der plays her very well.

Jen, on the other hand, is flexible and variable. Claudia Maurino plays her with intelligence and strength. Her tender moments are beautiful and her honest, revelatory grasps at reality are movingly played. She and Der are so different that their character's attractions are easy to understand as are their difficulties about the forthcoming wedding.

Della's husband is irascible, bombastic and an odd duck in the love-making department. He ultimately counters her failed seduction with one of his own. Sam Samuels plays the man with honesty and assurance. He is ultimately endearing.

The same cannot be said for the TV show host, George, played by Gabriel Levey. He is prideful, boorish and unpleasant in



Elizabeth Aspenlieder, Sam Samuels;
Photo: Cat/Milo Keatinge Bezark

this very satisfying performance.



Elizabeth Aspenlieder;
Photo: Cat/Milo Keatinge Bezark

I have seen Della played as *the* prominent character but in director Gina Kaufmann's careful production she is only one part of a larger picture, just as the play was written. Others take their place in center stage and the historic dilemma that inspired the play becomes an incentive for drama rather than drama itself. The show is a well-balanced play about four people with some odd life-difficulties rather than one person's human frailty and how she dealt with it.

The set, in three areas, designed presumably by the director (no one is credited in the program) works well and the costumes designed by Elizabeth Pangburn define the characters who wear them. The lighting design by Callum Doerner does everything it should to make the play work. Cake Crafer C. Ross deserves a special mention and probably an award, hopefully not presented by George.

This is a charming production of a problem play that deserves to be seen. Aspenlieder, long a favorite at Shakespeare and Company in Lenox, Massachusetts makes a hit, "a palpable hit," in the role of Della and it is wonderful to see her in something unexpected. Debra Jo Rupp, who played this role at Barrington Stage, originated it in New York. If you saw her in it, put that performance out of your mind and discover what Aspenlieder has brought to it.

+ 06/12/2023 +

The Cake plays at Emily Dickinson Hall, Hampshire College, at 893 West Street, Amherst, MA through June 18. For information and tickets go to Silverthornetheater.org.

