

Chester Theatre Company, Chester, MA  
*Circle Mirror Transformation* by Annie Baker; directed by Daniel Kramer.  
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

*“Night-terrors. . .”*

Actors suffer nightly. At least that’s what playwright Annie Baker wants us to know in her play “Circle Mirror Transformation” now on stage at the Chester Theater. Five actors ranging from 16 years old to more “mature” gather for six weeks to experiment with theater-games, with improvisation, with interpersonal realization in order to improve their chances at getting roles and moving along in their careers. They are mostly stalled and in need of that internal push many professionals require. They meet in a dance studio in Shirley, Vermont in the summer of 2008. The program contains more than a page of notes about the history of Shirley and reading it helps define the characters and their special needs. We also question why they are in Shirley if they want professional careers in theater.



Hero Marguerite, Corinna May, Tara Franklin, Alex Draper, Joel Ripka;  
Photo: Andrew Greto

Marty, the most experienced of the group, has organized this “Class” and she runs it with a martial manner. Played by Corinna May, Marty manages to always rise above any possibly difficult or embarrassing situation. She has courage and experience but still imagines she can win the role of Maria in the local high school production of “West Side Story.” Even the experienced can dream, even if the dream is illogical - well, isn’t that what dreams are? May plays her role with more chutzpah (oh, look it up!) than charm and it pays off for her. Her name could be short for Martinet for her sense of control is harsh and unyielding even when it comes to youth or stale relationships.

Tara Franklin plays Theresa, a serious actor who only want to get things right before its too late for her. Younger than Marty, and less experienced, she throws herself into the games and always aims to win them, even though there are no winners in theater games. Franklin understands her character perfectly and she changes her moods and her attacks on the action and the dialogue with expert enthusiasm. Her fellow players need to take care when she speaks.



Joel Ripka, Tara Franklin, Corinna May;  
Photo: Andrew Greto

Joel Ripka as the eternally pessimistic Schultz undertakes the “trap” role, a man who has more secrets than a DC confidential file and who cannot reveal them, but when he almost does he is shut down by May’s Marty who keeps him safer than he knows he needs to be. He is alternately funny and touching, a fine performance in a difficult role.

James, an older man played by Alex Draper, has secrets of his own including the facts of a romantic relationship kept from the group by an erstwhile Marty. Draper does some very amusing acting, in particular in his scenes with Corinna May and Hero Margurite who plays Lauren. Draper does some very fine work, dramatic and serious, in the course of this play.

The only non-Equity member of this company is Margurite whose Lauren is very appropriately whiny at times. Lauren is new to all this and questions everything which is funnier than it sounds. She is a delightful

addition to this company’s roster of actors.

Juliana von Haubrich’s spare but accurate setting allows director Daniel Kramer all the space he needs to keep this show on its feet, its backs and its knees when needed. He has done some remarkable work with Baker’s difficult script which is comprised of short blackout sequences, some of which I wouldn’t even consider to be scenes. He has artfully moved the play along its own time-frame without us realizing what he has done until very near the end of the play.

I like Annie Baker’s writing. She is a marvel at creating characters. Here they are really all we have and with this cast and director they are all we need. For those unfamiliar with the techniques of theater games this should be an interesting experience; for the rest of us, who have lived through them, it is a combination of terror and delight.

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**Circle Mirror Transformation** plays in the Chester Town Hall Theatre through August 20. For information and ticket go to [chestertheatre.or](http://chestertheatre.or) or call 413-354-7770.