

Berkshire Theatre Group, Stockbridge, MA
4000 Miles by Amy Herzog. Directed by Lizzie Gottlieb.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“. . . maximum earnestness slash unacknowledged irony . . .”

When 21 year old Leo arrives by bike at his grandmother’s Greenwich Village apartment 91 year old Vera is compelled to take him in for the night. A month later he leaves to ride his bike back to his parents’ home in the midwest. What transpires in that month makes up the bulk of “4000 Miles” by Amy Herzog, a play that is actually better than the version presented at the Unicorn Theatre in Stockbridge by the Berkshire Theatre Group as their season opener. They have given us an excellent, talented company of actors and designers and the play should be much more stimulating than it is. The only place I can assign blame for this lackluster presentation is at the feet of the director Lizzie Gottlieb. An astute director of documentaries, she has seemingly approached this material as another documentary, thereby missing the playwright’s intention to create a picture of how these two characters would approach their personal traumas.



Evan Silverstein, Maria Tucci, Photo: Caelan Carlough

Leo has had a heartbreaking experience on his trip, an emotional, sorrowful turn of events that would cripple a weaker soul. He cannot address it for a long time and when he finally does it is shattering. Vera has moved beyond this sort of thing and if she heard his story, she would likely mock it in her best off-putting manner. They are not a very compatible pair of room-mates.

As the leads in this four-character melodrama BTG has given us Evan Silverstein as Leo and Maria Tucci as Vera. These two extremely talented and capable actors have been held to single attitude performances. Not until the final two scenes in this hour and forty minute performance do they break even the slightest from their director’s vision of who they are and how they must behave. Silverstein, in his second role for BTG, has the tougher role to enliven.

Leo is dominated by his belief in his uncertain future. It cripples his ambitions, his sexual tension, his relationships. He is crippled in his affair with Bec, his girlfriend played by Gabriella Torres whose affection for Leo is as obvious as a gentle but persistent rainstorm. His one-night stand that isn't one, downstage left, with Amanda, played deliciously by Alison Ye., is almost as frustrating as his ever-present bicycle upstage right. It is only his growing understanding of the role that Vera plays in his daily life that gives him any true satisfaction.

Tucci is quite lovely in the role, a living, breathing entity that glows with each moment of tense friendship that she offers her grandson, Leo. She creates him in her mind as an equal and she treats him that way except in her less lucid moments when she accuses him of dishonesty and unfaithfulness. Vera has that bit of dementia that comes to the elderly that causes them the peculiar uncertainty about the surrounding realities that don't seem as real as they ought. Tucci plays them with an honesty and reality that makes you wonder if she is, perhaps, coming to the end of her useful years. Her simplicity is magnificent, her complexity elegant. What brings Tucci here to take on this role? It could be her own daughter. Director Gottlieb lives that particular role.



Alison Ye; Photo: David Dashiell



Evan Silverstein, Gabriella Torres;
Photo: David Dashiell

The creative team that brings us this production could not have been bettered at any regional theater. The broad stage at the Unicorn has been transformed into an old-fashioned Greenwich Village apartment with a large living room breaking off into two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen and an office nook/library. Designed by Jason Simms it is just right for this play and highly similar to apartments I have known in New York. The lighting, including four wall sconces, has been designed to perfection by Patricia M. Nichols. The characters' costumes are as real and natural as they could be under the pen and needle of Laurie Churba. The composer/sound

designer team of Clare and Olivier Manchon deliver wonderful moods and scene transitions. Lillian Ransijn delivers perfectly as the much needed Intimacy Coordinator.

Tucci and Herzog are well-matched in this tricky little play about a relationship that exists because of family ties. That it ultimately grows into a friendship based on the odd circumstances surrounding a character we never meet is a matter of moments missed. That it takes an hour and a half to reach its high point is unfortunate. I have seen this play before and Vera and Leo don't have to ring the same bells for the bulk of the play as they do in Gottlieb's vision. With so much here so good it is a pity that the play's gelatin should remain moist rather than solid.



Maria Tucci; Photo: David Dashiell

This is one of those plays that command your attention for the actors playing the roles and only the physical and sensual production values surrounding them. The characters come off as too real, too "documented" rather than as newly created. It is a play worth seeing but don't let your enthusiasm get the better of you. Enjoy what you can, if you can, and don't ask for more.

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4000 Miles plays at the Berkshire Theatre Group's Unicorn Theatre at 6 East Street in Stockbridge, Massachusetts through June 1. For information and tickets contact the box office at 413-887-4444 or go to their website at www.BerkshireTheatreGroup.org

