

Bridge Street Theatre, Catskill, NY

Mary Jane by Amy Herzog. Directed by Zoya Kachadurian.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

"Dream big, Mommy."

Mary Jane is a young mother, single, of a son born premature at 25 weeks and four days, afflicted with Cerebral Palsy, and a seizure disorder and lung disease. He is only two and a half years old and the odds of his survival are limited. How she deals with this personal disaster, aided by at least eight other women, is shown to us in Amy Herzog's play, now on stage at Bridge Street Theatre in Catskill, New York. Mary Jane lives in New York City in 2011 and the play's eight scenes cover about five months in her life. She is the title character and the play focuses on her and how she deals with her difficult situation but the play is really about her son Alex. We never see him, even in the hospital bed that appears in the second half of this ninety minute one act play. Still, we can feel his presence almost from the outset.



Amy Crossman, Clarissa Hernandez; Photo: Jeff Hewitt

Directed by Zoya Kachadurian, this play takes us through the quiet passions of Mary Jane, the controlled and contained mass of emotional reactions she presents in the odd situation she lives with. Having been abandoned by Alex's father she has to single-handedly take control of the situation and she does so by living as though there was nothing wrong in her life. It is odd, but smacks of truth, a very difficult truth: making the best of a difficulty is possible.

Amy Crossman plays Mary Jane with a cool and calm demeanor that seemingly is living in denial and yet the character discusses Alex and his situation with amazing ease, even with strangers. She is a person with absolutely no secrets. Crossman delivers a performance that is amazing, free of excessive emotion, direct and open, as straightforward as a potential suicide might be with a complete stranger about that awkward decision. Her one-note delivery, always calm and secure, keeps the play from becoming maudlin. It is an accomplished piece of work.



Amy Crossman, Roxanne Fay as Ruthie;
Photo: Jeff Hewitt



Amy Crossman, Renee Hewitt;
Photo: Jeff Hewitt

The four women, who play two character each, who support Crossman, are given the job of conveying emotional reactions to Mary Jane and her child. The first one is Ruthie, the apartment building custodian, played by Roxanne Fay who delivers a peculiarly heart-wrenching performance in this role. Her concern is evident, even in the simplicity of Herzog's dialogue. The sound of her voice and the arch of her body indicate her humanity brilliantly. Brianna, a friend, played by Renee Hewitt, takes up the challenge. In spite of her own difficulties Mary Jane is coaching Brianna on the difficulties of dealing with a child with severe limitations so that she might have an easier

time with authorities. Hewitt manages to keep her wits about her in this role so that the clinical material about Alex can be given to us without the need of a monologue or visual presentation. In her second role as Chaya, a religious Jewish woman with seven children, she expresses the bitterness of her own situation which parallels what Mary Jane must be feeling but isn't really expressing. She does especially well in this second role.

Marianne Matthews start off the play as Sherry, a small, short role, a nurse. In spite of her evident sympathy, the role has little impact in the play. She returns later as Doctor Toros, a marginally interested yet sympathetic professional who can't help Mary Jane grasp the realities of Alex's situation nor implement the therapy that has been ordered for him. Matthews plays the emotional disability of the doctor beautifully. It is hard not to be sympathetic to her character.

Clarissa Hernandez doubles as Amelia, a highly challenged woman who calls 911 in an emergency for Alex and can't quite pull off the consequential needs of the call and Kat, the music therapist whose schedule won't permit her to give real time to Alex's need for music. The actress is tall and very funny in her anxiety and she makes the music therapist into a wonderful character who is time-challenged and eager to help but constrained by the hospital's official restraints. In all of this Mary Jane never loses her cool composure and Crossman's curious reality is almost a secondary sensibility in both of her scenes with Hernandez.

Mary Jane's final encounter is also with Roxanne Fay who plays Tenkei, a Buddhist nun whose intentions are good and whose effect on the distressed mother is almost too soothing to believe. This is a charming and disarming performance by Fay, and after the previous two scenes a relief of the tensions we



Marianne Matthews, Clarissa Hernandez;
Photo: Jeff Hewitt.



Roxanne Fay as Tenkei, Amy Crossman;
Photo: Jeff Hewitt.

experience in them. Tenkei is a soother. Tenkei is a marvel. She brings an honesty into the play that no other character manages to do. Though this is a realistic comedy/drama there is throughout the play a strange sense of Mary Jane's belonging in a documentary film in which she is behaving as simple as possible in a situation that should be destroying her. I am sure there are women like her who put the best face possible on a horrid life experience, but somehow there is an upsetting unreality about Mary Jane's character.

Kachadurian has kept the play as simple and straightforward as Herzog's writing. She has turned the caricatures into characters. That we never see even an indication of Alex, not even in the hospital bed, is a mistake, for his lack of physical presence draws us out of the reality the play requires. Carnen Borgia's sets work well and make transitions relatively easy. His sound design also helps keep the play alive and timely. John Sowle's excellent lighting design gives us place, time and mood perfectly. Michelle Rogers has done well with the costumes.

All in all, this is a nearly fascinating production about a suffering child and his perky mother who can talk about the situation dispassionately in spite of her deeper feelings. It is a fascinating event, but not always a satisfying one.

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Mary Jane plays at Bridge Street Theatre, 44 W. Bridge Street, Catskill, NY through June 1. For information and tickets go to www.bridgest.org or call 518-943-3818.