

Our Mother's Brief Affair

by Richard Greenberg, directed by Pam McKinnon **World Premiere**

SOUTH COAST REPERTORY • April 3-May 3, 2009 (Opened 4/10, reviewed April 24)

In “Our Mother’s Brief Affair;” currently receiving its world premiere at the commissioning South Coast Repertory (through May 3), Richard Greenberg has again found his play’s material and mechanics in memory. Driven by the inquiry of the incomplete children of mysterious parents, “Affair” recalls the generational fluidity of his masterpiece, “Three Days of Rain,” and the actual characters of his lesser “Everett Beekin.” It is his richest, most interesting play in several outings.

The superior success of “Our Mother’s Brief Affair,” however, owes much to the sensitivity of director Pam McKinnon and the fine performances of a quartet of great stage actors.

It’s fair to begin looking at “Affair” with what first meets the eye. Scenic designer Sibyl Wickersheimer again takes chances as she did in SCR’s “Night Music.” And, again she succeeds in adding substantially to the production’s gestalt, making the set an emotional element without pulling focus from the players. Towering brick walls of Greenberg’s beloved ecru rise around the urban park, rusting at the top as they reach for the flies. They are arranged around the playground “monkey bars” and various benches as if to help twins Seth (Arye Gross) and Abby (Marin Hinkle) corner the squirrely memories their aged mother, Anna (Jenny O’Hara), lets loose over the series of visits that make up the 100-minute one-act.



Greenberg builds his narrative out of carefully jumbled pieces of recall. Seth and Abby sort through what they remember from their visits so that we first see Anna retelling the events and then reliving them as her children watch them occur as we do. Anna’s final days will be increasingly foggy, and the gray areas of her memory will grow more suspect. But Greenberg will not only empathize with that condition, he will employ it to further his mystery in what becomes an endearing tribute to the family member whose intellect is often underestimated.

Anna’s story is about a man (Matthew Arkin) she met, first accidentally and then through “assignment” (one of those unfortunate word choices, like ecru, that Greenberg cannot resist, and which catch in our ear canals like gall stones). He is, of course, everything her husband has ceased to be: most importantly, a sensitive, passionate listener. They will share secrets during an affair measured in weeks. And his secret, about his identity, will trigger the first “jagged turn in the evening,” as Seth describes it. This sends us off on another of Greenberg’s indulgences: a perhaps too-thorough recounting of an historical event. But this is excusable as it makes the playwright’s larger point. The event,

once seen as an unforgettable transgression in the mythology of the American left, has lost its immediacy. So, Seth tells the story. It may be tangential to the rest of the play, but it is a justifiable detour that asks us to shift our focus to collective, national memory. We see America as Anna, forgetting too easily, fabricating too wantonly, and hiding pieces of understanding from the children we expect to take the reins.

Not only has Greenberg made a motif of testing his characters' memories, he happily tests his audience's. We met Anna, and her sisters Sophie and Miri in "Everett Beekin," and followed Anna's two children (in that case, sisters) as one moved to Orange County.

For her part, McKinnon first cast the show perfectly and then gave her actors a wonderful pace and environment with which to work. They often linger on the benches after a scene, reading a paper or napping before their next scenes, creating an appealing sense of spontaneity and independence. All are excellent and, predictably, Hinkle's performance has not an eyelash out of place. But in Gross, she gives the play a center that is so sensitive that we imagine it a stand-in for the writer. There is something particularly right about how Gross deals with O'Hara's Anna. It's a window into a lived-in relationship. We see it in all its complexity, sweetness and angst. Seth has been built with calm, understanding and love. And that becomes one of the memories audiences will take away from this enjoyable and enriching production.

CREDITS

CAST Matthew Arkin, Arye Gross, Marin Hinkle, Jenny O'Hara • **PRODUCTION** Sybil Wickersheimer, set; Rachel Myers, costumes; Lap-Chi Chu, lights; Michael K. Hooker, sound; John Glore, dramaturg; Kathryn Davies/Chrissy Church, stage management. • **HISTORY** Commissioned and developed by South Coast Repertory

CAPTIONS

FRONT PAGE Matthew Arkin, Jenny O'Hara, Marin Hinkle and Arye Gross •
ABOVE Arye Gross
PHOTOGRAPHER Henry DiRocco

