

The Quality of Life

written and directed by Jane Anderson **World Premiere**

Geffen Playhouse / Skirball • October 2-November 18 (Opened 10/10; rev. 10/13m)

When a world premiere has a marquee cast with the star power to pull the magnetic strip off a credit card, ticket buyers need only minimal assurance of script quality to let the plastic fly. Rest assured, Jane Anderson's 'The Quality of Life,' at the commissioning Geffen Playhouse through November 18, is a worthy showcase for the substantial talents of Scott Bakula, Dennis Boutsikaris, Laurie Metcalf and JoBeth Williams.

That should be all a curious theatergoer – especially those age 50 and above – needs to hear. Further details would only diminish the experience. Also, chances are tickets could sell out in the time it takes to read the rest of this. But we will continue: Quality control demands we provide more than a three-sentence review.

For this first Geffen commission to reach the boards, writer-director Anderson has packed a 20-unit survey of contemporary life into two acts and two hours. With dramaturgical alchemy she integrates a multitude of thorny issues into 'Quality of Life.' At the top of the list is the obvious Kevorkian context of weighing the options of living with disease. But clear yardsticks are laid down everywhere against which we might measure what feels like every aspect of our lives: the quality of our marriages, religious faith or resistance, lifestyles, environmental sensitivity, appreciation of parenting, and our sense of social justice and leniency. Even our responsibility to personal and community legacy.

The playwright has created characters that clearly represent distinct choices made in these many areas. However, with thanks in great part to the fine acting, they come across as typical folks and not as types. The actors simultaneously focus our attention on their micro-stories while letting universal meaning ripple out.

Anderson builds this instrument of observation upon the various inter-relations of two couples. Connected through the wives' shared grandmother, they are distanced by 2,000 U.S. highway miles and diametrically opposed beliefs in how to cope with good and evil, randomness and determinism, and perhaps even life and death.

Homemaker Dinah (Williams) and homebuilder Bill (Bakula) live in Ohio, mired in a threadbare marriage that lost its cover a year earlier with the torture-murder of their college-age daughter. They are as strong as they expect they ever will be again, having rebuilt their psyches with the unyielding materials their church provided. A rare letter from Jeannette (Metcalf), explaining that Neil (Boutsikaris) is in a losing battle with cancer, prompts Dinah to insist that the housebound Ohioans pack for a weekend out west.

The minutes-long Ohio scene is prelude. The bulk of the play is set in the eerie campsite that used to be Jeannette and Neil's mountain home in Northern California. In another brutal twist of fate, an accidentally set forest fire has turned it into a virtual lava-field. With a nomad's tent, an outhouse, bathtub and cooking station, they proudly show off their ability to survive simply and without possessions.



Laurie Metcalf
Dennis Boutsikaris

PHOTO MICHAEL LAMONT

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The strength of spirit with which they approach these devastations confounds the devout Bill, as does Neil's use of medical marijuana. Despite the placating Dinah's best efforts, the couples are able to share only hours before their differences make the reunion too uncomfortable.

Metcalf is back at the Geffen after her production-raising turn as Kate in 'All My Sons.' If Arney can talk her into being a cornerstone of a Geffen acting company, we're in for some great years in Los Angeles. Boutsikaris, who was last at the Geffen in 'The Old Neighborhood,' creates an indelible Neil. He becomes a man whose loss to students seems as significant as his loss to Jeannette. Bakula has the toughest assignment by far here and does a good job of walking the line between character and cardboard. Williams is the real heart-breaker though. A too-familiar character in too many American homes, she begins as a human squeeze-toy in infinite need of one more hug.

Anderson does stack the deck, but not beyond what is necessary for her basic challenge to think about how we live. True, Bill is overly intolerant, Neil and Jeanette seem overly enlightened and poor Dinah overly doughy. But none of them will seem that alien to those of us who've circled the block a few times. And, for the ground they must cover in two hours, they are perfectly legitimate.

That said, Bill could be less uptight about breaking drug laws and still be adamant about breaking God's laws. When he needs to get offstage and sit in the car, he can just as easily excuse himself because he needs to do that for his personal peace. Bakula could use a few spots to open this guy up without breaking the shell.

Williams delivers Dinah's speech of indignation beautifully. It's a sudden and rarely evoked blast of highly emotional articulation. A little fluster and stumbling might make it land more believably, however.

And, the final moments, as beautiful as they are, have not found their timing. As written and staged, there's some wobbling in the shifts between California and Ohio. Following the natural transition from lecture to Yurt and beyond, one wonders if moving the Ohio scene up would help. To save more time, the chairs could be part of the lecture stage before being part of the Ohio scene. Maybe at other performances the ovation comes without the curtain call cue coming up. If not, in a play where timing, and endings, are so integral, finding a way for artists and audience to arrive at their parting on the same wavelength -- which we all were ready for -- would be a great legacy with which to mark our brief time together.

WITH Scott Bakula, Dennis Boutsikaris, Laurie Metcalf, JoBeth Williams PRODUCTION François-Pierre Couture, set; Christina Haatainen Jones, costumes; Jason H. Thompson, lights; Karl Lundeberg, sound; Amy Levinson Millán, dramaturg; Anna Belle Gilbert, stage management