

# Redwood Curtain's 'Mothers and Sons' is poignant, powerful

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For the Times-Standard

Redwood Curtain continues on an artistic roll in their 17th season started by their outstanding dramedy, "Outside Mullingar", with an equally impressive production of four-time Broadway Tony Award winning playwright Terrance McNalley's thought-provoking 2014 drama, "Mothers and Sons."

Before writing this review, I've not only had time to sort out my own personal impressions of what I experienced during the show's opening performance, but I also did something that I've never done before (after the fact): gone on-line to the playwright's biography and discovered what led him to create this initially paradoxical work.

In doing so, an unexpected, fascinating and illuminating fact emerged that makes "Mothers and Sons" even more intriguing. Because the genesis for the material is a 25-years-later re-introduction of two central characters who originally appeared in 1988 in McNalley's ten minute play, "Andre's Mother."

Created in the middle of the deadly AIDS epidemic ravaging the gay community in New York City, he addressed the tragic aftermath of a symbolic, young gay man named Andre's recent passing. However, the story was not really about Andre, but how his loss (and the other lives lost due to the disease) impacted the lives of those left behind—both instantly and forever.

It exposed the individual reactions of the most important people in his lost, promising, 20-something life who have bewilderingly come together after Andre's memorial service in nearby Central Park. Gathered in the up-scale, West Side apartment he shared with his now grieving lover, Cal (with windows overlooking the park), are his father, Arthur, and

sister, Penney. Completing the mourners are Andre's stony-faced (un-named) mother. She remains visibly unreadable, obviously still not capable of either understanding or accepting who her son always "was."

She listens silently as the others struggle to find the words to describe "their" beloved Andre. And, although she remains after her husband and daughter depart (leaving her and Cal "alone together"), she stands there stoically while Andre's heartbroken partner finally explodes in a torrent of poignantly painful memories about their lives together.

Such love was incomprehensible to her generation—and, being honest with himself, it was what drove Andre away from their family home to where he was accepted in New York. But, his death and her lack of understanding, left behind many unspoken, unresolved issues between Cal and "Andre's Mother." In both the 1988's short one-act, as well as an expanded 50 minute PBS version in 1990.

Apparently McNalley was still drawn back to these two, now-older (mutually unresolved) characters enough that he felt they deserved to be revisited and explored further in 2014's "Mothers and Sons"—honoring the cultural changes that had evolved then (and are continuing today).

The fight against the originally mysterious (not just a "gay") disease that took Andre and so many others too soon is still not over, but has won many victories. And, there has been more understanding/acceptance (still a work-in-progress) that there are all kinds of love and relationships between people.

This has led to the legalization of gay marriage (never in the cards for Andre and Cal), and the fact that gay couples just like "straight" ones, are perfectly capable of being parents who can provide loving homes for their children. Something that certainly



PHOTO COURTESY OF REDWOOD CURTAIN

**Bernadette Cheyne and Gary Sommers star in Redwood Curtain's currently running production of "Mothers and Sons."**

wasn't even vaguely possible before.

In any case, those issues in the play's "back-story" have obviously still not been previously discussed, or resolved, when the lights at Redwood Curtain come up on Cal (Gary Sommers) and Katherine (now Andre's Mother's name, portrayed by Bernadette Cheyne) in "Mothers and Sons."

Wearing more unseen armor than a knight preparing to joust, the now-widowed, brittle and bitter woman has arrived "unannounced and uninvited" back at the same New York apartment where the two first stood their grieving ground after Andre's memorial service—still blaming Cal for his untimely death.

However, the expensive space is now shared by Cal's much younger husband, Will (who stirs things up later when Sam Greenspan enters as Cal's spouse). It's also home to the couple's endearing seven-year-old son, Bud (Benjamin Smith), the welcome result of Will's "contribution," carried to term by a carefully-chosen, surro-

gate mother. Bottom line. They're a loving family.

And that, in fact, after all of the verbal and emotional exchanges that occur throughout this marvelously insightful and unbelievably moving series of "eventual conversations" between characters that take place over an uninterrupted flow of an hour and forty-five minutes of mesmerizing theatre, I've come to the conclusion that McNalley's title for this play should have been: "Mothers, Dads and Sons."

The playwright paints a poignant portrait of how reluctantly delving into the past has the power to unearth unexpected acceptance (if never complete understanding) of our lost relationships and unshared secrets. But, if we're finally willing, can bring us together. While they still haunt our memories, we can treasure the ones we want to treasure, and then free ourselves to find love—in many unforeseen ways—in

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both the present and the future. The exceptional Redwood Curtain cast takes you there.

Director, Jyl Hewston, says that she just "stayed out of the way" (with as few notes as possible) because this remarkably insightful and talented ensemble intuitively knew exactly what they were doing. Individual and collective bravos.

Also outstanding are Jared Sorenson's striking, effective scenic and lighting designs; Kristen Mack's subtle sound design; and Jenneveve L. Hood's character-perfect costumes.

Stage management is by Justin Takata, assisted by Jennifer Reed, with light and sound boards run by Kelly Reed.

Experiencing Terrence McNally's "Mothers and Sons" is like slowly peeling away each layer of an emotional onion that brings you closer to tears as you journey to the broken heart where it all began. It's a rocky road well worth taking.

This remarkable production continues its must-see run on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. through May 14, with a 2 p.m. matinee on Sunday, May 8. And, remember, there is no late seating after curtain.

Tickets are \$10 on Thursdays and \$15 for all other performances. Reserve them in advance by calling 443-7688, emailing [boxoffice@redwoodcurtain.com](mailto:boxoffice@redwoodcurtain.com) or visiting [www.redwoodcurtain.com](http://www.redwoodcurtain.com).