

'Ripcord' unleashes insightful silliness at Redwood Curtain

BY BETI WEBB TRAUTH
For the Times-Standard

Just when I thought that Redwood Curtain had most likely wrapped up its 2018 season brilliantly with its next-to-last production, "Marjorie Prime," along came its last, "Ripcord."

Rarely, if ever, do two plays in a row (no matter where they're being produced) reach such a near-equal level of poignant power and artistic excellence. And, luckily for local audiences, you still have a chance to see one of them.

Although both scripts, interestingly enough, explore the very different health and emotional challenges that "older" women face (and deal with in their own ways) in assisted-living care homes, "Ripcord" by David Lindsay-Abaire definitely takes his characters in a far more comedic direction deftly mixed in with their sometimes painful reality.

And, of course, how their "caregivers" and relatives behave with them (and each other) is an entirely matter as well. So, even though the subject matter overtly sounds similar, the approach couldn't be further away from what you'll experience when you see the truly hilarious (and insightfully, surprisingly heartbreaking) "Ripcord."

The superb, ensemble cast is artistically co-anchored by the terrific twin talents of Peggy Metzger and Susan Abbey as the oddest of odd couples/roommates you'll ever encounter. Metzger is Abby Binder — the Oscar the Grouch, original occupant of an upper floor, double bedroom (with her bed in the prime, near the window loca-

tion) of the Bristol Place Senior Living Center in suburban New Jersey.

A determined "loner" who has secretly delighted in "running off" an obviously long line of previously discouraged roommates with her prickly personality traits, she has now more than met her match with the hyper-positive and hyperactive Marilyn Dunne (Abbey's sweetly toxic persona). The pair is as compatible as oil and water, but Marilyn seems determined to not only "hold her ground" despite her dour roommate's disposition, but makes a bet with her to "score" the room's prize: the bed near the window.

How that psychological — and ridiculously physical — contest between these crafty combatants plays out is a hoot until the bittersweet end-game is "won" by "one" at the final curtain. However, before that occurs, we are introduced to their on-site "resident aide" Scotty (the wonderful David Hamilton), an endearingly, somewhat inept charmer who longs to be "an actor."

There's also Marilyn's energetic, well-meaning daughter, Colleen (the always intriguing Natasha White) and her supportive husband, Benjamin (played with panache by Gary Bowman). The fantastic ensemble is completed by the talents of Jeremy Webb (who will surprise you with his depth as Abby's estranged son, Benjamin).

Supporting players are also individually multi-cast in deliciously odd cameo roles, including "a Cloud"; "a mysterious Woman In White"; "Lewis, Marilyn's skydiving instructor son"; "a Zombie Butler"; "a scary Clown"; and "a Masked (White Rabbit) Man."



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Peggy Metzger, left, and Susan Abbey are pictured in Redwood Curtain's "Ripcord."

If they sound somewhat "Alice In Wonderland-like," the playwright's whimsically warped sense of humor probably meant them to feel just that.

Director Cassandra Hesseltine handles the show with a sure hand that knows how to skillfully alternate her solid cast in hitting the rights notes between laughter and pathos as they navigate from the ridiculous to the touching and back again, blurring the lines between the two while the audience is carried seamlessly along for the ride — and loving it.

In addition to emotional roller-coaster, there are some absolutely "insane" bits of extreme physical comedy that will literally blow you away in the skydiving sequence (that's right, you'll find the title's symbolism here for sure), and an outrageous prank pulled in the roommates' bathroom that you won't soon forget.

Another of the show's strengths is the excellent, detailed scenic design of Robert Pickering co-constructed with Gary Sommers and painted by Pickering. There is also an effective addition of a movable set of curtains that covers the main room space while some important, "outside" action takes place.

The clever sound design is by Jon Turney; the lighting by Hesseltine and Justin Takata (with lights and sound run by Sebby Le); the character-defining and quirky costumes are by Laura Rhinehart; the wide array of eclectic properties by Morgan Mc-

Broom; and stage manager/running crew is Jessica McKnight.

But you'll just have to come and experience all of these marvelous elements for yourself to see exactly what happens when these mismatched ladies finally decide to "pull the ripcord" of life, "take a leap of faith" and learn how it feels to take flight into the future's unknown space. Alone and together.

If you had only one more, endlessly entertaining production to see before our area-wide, strong theater year ended in Humboldt County, this would be it: Redwood Curtain's irresistible, unforgettable "Ripcord." They've truly saved their best laughs for last!

"Ripcord" continues its run at 8 p.m. on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays through Nov. 17. There will also be Sunday matinees at 2 p.m. on Nov. 4 and 11.

Tickets are \$17 except on Cheap Date Night Thursdays (Nov. 1, 8, 15) with two for \$20. Purchase them securely online at www.redwoodcurtain.com, or reserve them by going to boxoffice@redwoodcurtain.com or calling 707-443-7688.

Seating is limited to 80, so buying or reserving tickets in advance is highly recommended. And remember that there is no late seating for any performance once the show has begun.

The theater is located in Old Town Eureka at 220 First St., with the main entrance behind the building through Snug Alley.