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Theater review: 'Spark' eloquently counterpoints family concerns against a larger world in conflict

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Sometimes a play creates such a strong sense of place that it immediately transports you to its setting. This is the case with Caridad Svich's "Spark," making its regional premiere in a spare, emotionally powerful production by Pygmalion.

The place is rural North Carolina along Tobacco Road, and the Glimord sisters are mired in its poverty. Their mother slaved in the tobacco fields to make ends meet when their father "went AWOL" after returning from the Vietnam War. When she died, leaving her daughters only songs and stories to sustain them, Evelyn (Stephanie Howell) took over.

"I promised Mama that I'd do right by you," she tells Ali (Anna Louise Brings), the youngest.

That combination of obligation and desperation makes her constantly snipe at her sisters. She loves them, but she's afraid to be soft even with Hector (JayC Stoddard), the neighbor who wants to marry her. "Families are what they are," he tells her philosophically. "Sometimes you just gotta let the mess be what it is."

But Evelyn keeps pushing Ali, who just graduated from high school, to find a job. "Workin' on it. Do it in time" is Ali's answer. She has dreams of being a boxer like



Courtesy Photo

Actor Adriana Broumas Farber plays Lexie, a returned veteran, in Pygmalion Productions' regional premiere of Caridad Svich's "Spark."

Lexie (Ariana Farber), the middle sister whom she idolizes.

It's into this edgy atmosphere that Lexie returns from "the conflict" in Afghanistan. She enlisted in the military to get a better life for herself and her family, but she was sent to fight. Now she has her own demons to cope with. "A light shines in the distance, but what I see is a fire," she tells Evelyn. "Pray we're not ash before morning."

It takes a meeting with a stranger, another veteran (Andrew Maizner), to focus Lexie's restlessness in a new direction. "The forgetting has a way of coming back," he tells her in a poetically succinct definition of PTSD. "Walk back to where you been, where people who love you are waiting."

Svich has an ingenious way of injecting moments of epiphany into the fabric of everyday life. The chief way the Glimord sisters — as Hector likes to call them — communicate is through snatches of songs and stories their mother taught them. Combined with Lexie's military cadences, they provide access to the inner lives of largely inarticulate characters.

Pygmalion's production hooks instinctively into the play's Southern rhythms. Thomas George's miscellaneous, makeshift set pieces proclaim the sparseness of the sisters' lives, physically and emotionally. Jesse Portillo's moody lighting is enhanced by early morning mist. Teresa Sanderson's costumes are casual and unassuming. Most notable are Mikal Troy Klee's rich sound design with its bird calls, thunder and rain, and Bronwyn Beacher's folk and blues music settings.

Howell, Brings and Farber assimilate easily into the dynamic of family life, an uneasy alliance of very different personalities. Howell adeptly counterpoints Evelyn's frustration and constant concern against her loneliness and desire for personal happiness. Brings' Ali is a person in transition: She wants to make things better but isn't sure how to do it. And Farber's Lexie burns with incandescent intensity, struggling to make sense of what she's been through. Stoddard's Hector is a pillar of stabilizing support, and Maizner gives the stranger an air of otherworldly wisdom.

I introduced Svich to Pygmalion after she won our American Theatre Critics Association Francesca Primus Prize three years ago. She is an eloquent voice in American theater who hasn't been heard locally before. In "Spark," she foregrounds family issues against the larger backdrop of veterans trying to reintegrate into an American society that largely ignores them in a way that more than does justice to both.

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'Spark'

P Pymalion's production subtly hooks us into the ups and downs of a family trying to break old patterns and create new ones.

When • Reviewed Oct. 30; plays Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. through Nov. 15, with an extra matinee Nov. 15 at 2 p.m.

Where • Leona Wagner Black Box Theatre at the Rose Wagner Performing Arts Center, 138 W. Broadway, Salt Lake City

Running time • Two hours (including an intermission)

Tickets • \$20; \$15 for students and seniors; 801-355-ARTS or www.arttix.org for tickets, www.pygmalionproductions.org for information

Also • A talkback exploring PTSD and other veterans issues will take place after the Nov. 9 matinee.

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