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STAGE REVIEWS

Review: 'Motherhouse' at Rivendell Theatre is a fresh and offbeat portrait of women and grief

By Chris Jones

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Jessica Ervin, Mary Cross, Meighan Gerachis, Jane Baxter Miller and Tara Mallen in "Motherhouse" by Rivendell Theatre Ensemble. (Michael Brosilow / HANDOUT)

It's been a while since a storefront Chicago theater put on one of its most enduring pleasures: an exciting first play from a young Chicago writer.

But that's what you'll find from the hugely talented Tuckie White at the intimate Rivendell

Theatre Ensemble, which has developed its latest show in-house. White, also a Chicago actor, has penned some prospective stuff for YouTube and the like. But as far as I know, she'd never written for the theater until "Motherhouse," a zesty, offbeat, energetic and intergenerational portrait of women in grief.

The funny 90-minute play relies on a hoary device: a group of relatives gathering for a funeral and then both loving and beating each other up. As all fans of "[Succession](#)" well know, reactions to death offer great opportunities for playwrights to craft scenes about people dropping their usual barriers and exposing their inner cores. While I've seen this scenario many times before in plays, White still manages to make it feel fresh.

And, frankly, there's enough wit, complexity and richness of dramatic character on display here to make you look forward to what this writer might do in a more original scenario. The play's rich and linguistically complex sense of dark humor kept putting me in mind of a Chicago playwright from the early aughts named Marisa Wegrzyn, who went on to make good in TV.

Here's the "Motherhouse" setup: The central character and authorial voice is Annie (Jessica Ervin), a young woman preparing to eulogize her mother. But the dead mom had four sisters, all of whom show up in her kitchen: Weezie (Meighan Gerachis), an eccentric in combat attire; Lizzie (Tara Mallen), a sweet soul; the pugnacious Tucker (Mary Cross); and complex Barbie, Jane Baxter Miller.

All four aunts are played by skilled longtime Rivendell ensemble members who know how to add veracity and heart to a new play. The director, Azar Kazemi, has injected pace and vivacity into the proceedings.



Mary Cross and Jessica Ervin in "Motherhouse" by Rivendell Theatre Ensemble. (Michael Brosilow / HANDOUT)

Annie's relationship with her mother was complicated, to say the least ("She wasn't careful with you," one of the aunts observes), and yet the deceased is very much present in the play. White keeps you guessing as to how much the aunts are helping, or hurting, a young woman struggling with both grief and her own past. At times, the play feels like a critical exploration of the damage wrought by bad parenting, at other moments a look at mental health and, at still others, an affirmation of the power of family to overcome almost anything.

The main weakness of "Motherhouse," to my mind, is that it doesn't fully establish its own normal, which always helps with a play where things get stranger and stranger as the dramatic action unspools. I'd argue in the early scenes with Annie and Weezie that things could root themselves more firmly in everyday truth. It's crucial to believe in some kind of reality before the absurd takes over. The audience needs a root.

That said, **the show still roars with life throughout**: there's a sense of pent-up energy and a kind of raw, vulnerable intensity that, frankly, I've not seen for a good long while. Risks are taken here. You won't be bored for a moment and Ervin, who plays Annie, just gets better and better as the show progresses.

Chris Jones is a Tribune critic.

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Review: "Motherhouse" (3 stars)

When: Through May 7

Where: Rivendell Theatre, 5779 N. Ridge Ave.

Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes

Tickets: \$39 at 773-334-7728 and rivendelltheatre.org