

Compelling 'Facing East' packs enormous punch

By Pat Craig
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For a moment, death makes answers seem so clear and obvious.

If only I'd said

If only I'd done

Of course, standing on the lip of a grave it's too late.

A tragic death. A suicide, particularly that of a loved one. A loved one whose end may well have been prevented with a bit of kindness or even a blind attempt at understanding

Those are the thoughts that play uncomfortably through your mind as you watch Walnut Creek author Carol Lynn Pearson's poignant, disturbing and memorable play, "Facing East," running through this weekend at San Francisco's Theatre Rhinoceros.

Alex and Ruth McCormick's (Charles Lynn Frost and Jayne Luke) son, Andrew, 24, a gifted musician, died, and was buried in a consecrated cemetery, facing east, the direction of the sunrise and the Lord on Resurrection morning.

Alex and Ruth linger at the graveside after the services because Alex is intent on setting the record straight with his own, brutally honest elegy. His son died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound in a flower garden of the Salt Lake Mormon Temple. He had been excommunicated by his church. He was a homosexual man living with another man his family chose not to meet.

Pearson has written extensively on gay and Mormon themes, much from personal experience (she married a man in the Mormon church who was gay. They divorced when he was unable to change his orientation, but remained friends. Eventually, as he was dying from AIDS, he moved back into her home, where she cared for him).

When she was writing "Facing East," she connected with the Salt Lake City-based Plan-B Theatre, which helped her develop the script, and performed it successfully in Salt Lake and New York's off-Broadway before opening the San Francisco run.

While "Facing East" deals with the Mormon church and homosexuality, the core message of the show is much more universal. It is the idea of tolerance and understanding, and a reminder to all parents that the complex nature of dealing with offspring doesn't end with a graduation of specific age; and that emotional injuries, even those inflicted unintentionally, can have serious and far-reaching consequences.

Fortunately, from a theatrical standpoint, Pearson is much more interested in telling an engaging story in a compelling fashion than preaching. The play is beautifully written and paced so the whole situation is revealed in a series of small surprises.

The direction by Jerry Rapier tells the story in a gentle, matter-of-fact, almost understated manner that heightens the realism of the piece.

And the cast members -- Frost and Luke, along with Jay Perry, who plays Andrew's lover -- play their roles with a quiet intensity that gives the piece a remarkable urgency.

It is a show that won't appeal to everyone, but it packs an enormous punch and tells a story that resonates far beyond its roots.

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THEATER REVIEW

WHAT: Plan-B Theatre Company presents "Facing East," by Carol Lynn Pearson

WHEN: Wednesdays-Sundays through Aug. 26

WHERE: Theatre Rhinoceros, 2926 16th St., S.F.

RUNNING TIME: 75 minutes

HOW MUCH: \$20

CONTACT: 415-861-5079, <http://www.ticketweb.com>, <http://www.therhino.org>

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