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Playwright Sky Gilbert gives Theatre Aquarius audience compelling, haunting homage with 'Pat and Skee'

Gary Smith

Akinder, gentler Sky Gilbert awaits you at Theatre Aquarius, both literally and figuratively.

The controversial playwright, actor, director and drag queen extraordinaire has shucked off the undertow of political rant and extravagant excesses and with his new play, "Pat and Skee," he has opened a troubling personal wound.

"Pat and Skee" is an always compelling and finally haunting homage to his parents and to growing up in a less than perfect household. It is, in particular, a desperate remembrance of his often flamboyant, always vulnerable mother Pat, a love-starved enchantress who looms large at the centre of this wonderful play.

Spewing invective, with a tongue sharp as broken glass, she jigs about, wiggling her curvaceous hips, shaking her mane of fly-away blond hair, a lovable creature of will and whim. No matter how excoriating her tongue, we know this is a woman trapped in a lonely marriage, tethered to an upright, respectable man who doesn't offer the romantic, sexually satisfying passion she needs.

Gilbert has brilliantly created a moving remembrance of these parents and their

Ralph Small as Skee and Suzanne Bennett as Pat.

ultimate acceptance of him as their gay son.

"He couldn't catch or throw a ball," his dad says. "I knew right then and there."

"I always knew he was different" says his mom, telling him not to ogle the waiter as they sit at some tony Toronto restaurant. "I remember how he pushed his Raggedy Ann doll around in a carriage when he was a little boy."

Gilbert views this world growing up, with a firm degree of compassion, first in Connecticut with both his parents, then at 12 years old coming to Toronto with just his mother.

Like Tom in Tennessee Williams' great memory play, "The Glass Menagerie," he relives life with painful, yet often humorous and touching memories that can't easily be exorcised. It is, by any account, the work of a brave and mature playwright, and my goodness, it is a blessing that it's here in Hamilton having its world premiere.

With this work, an internationally acclaimed playwright, who has had productions of his plays performed in New

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York, San Francisco, Vancouver and Toronto, Gilbert has finally been welcomed to Theatre Aquarius, where “Pat and Skee” is being presented in the neatly reimagined Studio Theatre. It’s been labelled a Festival Production, whatever that means. If it’s a suggestion that it is a celebration of something splendid, then the nomenclature is perfectly apt.

Gilbert is part of the triumvirate of actors appearing in this evocative work and he is a skilled performer who frequently suggests the value of listening. In his interchanges with his stage mom and dad, he suggests a quiet intensity, a potent personality that draws you to his presence.

Ralph Small is excellent as the troubled dad, trying to come to terms with a world in which selling insurance is the excitement of his day. He longs for the visceral remembrance of his wartime experiences and possibly yearns for a son who would share his world of sports and loud male talk.

Suzanne Bennett, as the smoking, binge drinking Jazz Baby is the hurricane at this play’s white hot centre. She trills a few lines of a smoky Peggy Lee song, wafts her long white cigarette about like some magic wand, and in her cloudy, frequently misty eyes, we see fear, as well as the occasional moment of transforming joy.

These are sensitive, powerful performances that are a testament to Gilbert’s thoughtful and imaginative direction, as well as his immense skill as a playwright.

When the troubled Pat pounds repeatedly on a desk stapler and uses a gleaming toy silver plane to dive-bomb a mess of paper clips on a table, these are not just

random acts. They are visual clues suggested by a clever actress and a creative director.

An award-winning playwright, with several Doras on his dresser, Gilbert is an important theatre voice. But I don’t think he’s ever been as personally invested in a play as he has with “Pat and Skee.” When he projects an old faded photograph of his mom on a bare theatre wall, as the last of jazz performers David Lee and Chris Palmer’s evocative notes of long-ago musical riffs fade from memory, you leave the theatre transported on a waft of melancholy, seduced by what you have seen and experienced.

Can you tell I loved it madly? Go see “Pat and Skee” if you love thoughtful, provocative theatre.

Gary Smith has written about theatre and dance for The Hamilton Spectator for 40 years. gsmith1@cogeco.ca

Pat and Skee

Where

Theatre Aquarius, Dofasco Centre for the Arts,

190 King William St.

When

March 10-11-12 at 7.30 p.m. and March 12 at 1.30 p.m.

Tickets

\$25 (some concessions may apply on internet sales)

Information

905-522-7529

theatreaquarius.org