

Marie Kohler's 'The Dig' Excavates Family History

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The events of a family's history and the events of a nation's history, refracted through the prism of time, are the themes of Marie Kohler's play *The Dig*, as directed by Alex Coddington.

Sturgeon Bay's Third Avenue Playhouse is a cozy space, but the play's imaginative arc moves across decades—1950s, '60s and '90s—as Mattie and her older brother Jaime attempt to recount what happened when Jaime participated in an archaeological expedition in Lebanon. His mental break was preceded by the collision of familial expectations and the path of his dream career. In flashbacks, Mattie is the apple of his eye. Yet, in the present, Jaime's glossolalia rhyme-speak offers crumbs of clues that baffle Mattie regarding the artifact's provenance and rightful ownership. His recitation of eras "Phoenicians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks..." echo the layers of family history being dug up for investigation at last.

The repatriation of pottery that Jaime unearthed has come under investigation decades later. Getting to the bottom of its history is entwined with the family's history. How do families deal with taboo subject matters? How do pieces of land become a part of a country? How do these issues change over time when hidden truths are brought into the light?



Kohler's play is foremost sensitive, yet honest in taking up these challenges. Peter Reeves as Jaime embodies his character's inner turmoil and OCD drive, who describes himself as cracked like the pot. He sits in a chair among a stand of birch trees nearly the entire performance, like a sentinel—a presence who is there but not there—while his younger self (Christopher Sheard) continues to work the excavation site on the other side of the stage.

Karen Moeller's Mattie has grown into a successful career woman who wants to view the situation as water under the bridge but comes to learn things about her brother she did not want to know, all the while fearing the family history may hold a similar fate for herself.

The story also works as a mystery. Ultimately, there is a price to pay for ignoring things, Jaime's ex-wife tells his sister. No one made him leave but no one encouraged him to stay.

Through July 20 at Third Avenue Playhouse, 239 N. Third Ave., Sturgeon Bay. For tickets, visit thirdavenueplayhouse.com.