

Warren Gerds/Critic at Large: Review: 'The Dig' explores archaeology and the mind in Sturgeon Bay

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In their youth, sister and brother Mattie (Karen Moeller) and Jamie (Christopher Sheard) look to the sky and find Orion and Gemini in a scene from the Third Avenue Playhouse production of "The Dig." (Heidi Hodges)

STURGEON BAY, Wis. (WFRV)

The simplest thing about "The Dig" is its title.

The play is a detective story of sorts. A sister searches for clues to why her brother became unhinged during an archaeological excavation 30 years past in Lebanon.

She is looking back from 1998. From Chicago.

In 1968, Lebanon was embattled.

She – Mattie – is forced into the search because Lebanon demands the return of an ancient vase found during the dig, and her schizophrenic brother likely will have to answer questions about how the 5,000-year old object came into his possession. Mattie feels a need to protect her beloved brother, Jamie, because of his fragile, frazzled mental state.

Jamie is given to spewing nursery rhymes, rhymed words period and the age-old advice of a sage, “Know thyself,” as he buries himself in books about precious artifacts and myths and the literature of Rudyard Kipling.

Mattie becomes more and more driven as she meets those who were at the site with Jamie and finds elusive any facts and information from them.

Knowing becomes an obsession for Mattie.

This story is told in theatrical ways, and highly imaginative ways at that.

At times, Mattie and Jamie are seen in flashbacks to their youth. She is 13, and he a young man about to be married and go off on an adventure on the other side of the world. Their voices are girlish and young/playful, respectively.

At all times, the Jamie of 1998 is present on stage to the audience’s left. Sometimes he speaks in his peculiar way. Most often, he sits and stares.

At times, the older Jamie and Mattie engage in byplay about the past as events of 1968 with young Jamie in Lebanon play out to the audience’s right with various people in Jamie’s life. The people could be Jamie’s professor, Jamie’s wife, a sketchy French peddler, or the professor’s wife – each played by the same two actors who have started out as Mattie’s husband and the officious museum authority who presses for knowledge about the legitimacy of the artifact.

Yes, the simplest thing about “The Dig” is its title.

The creation of Wisconsin-bred playwright Marie Kohler, the play is in the midst of a one-month run at Third Avenue Playhouse. Guest directing is Alexander Coddington. The players are honed professional actors of long experience in the state.

What plays out feels driven, once the gears start churning. Performances Friday night felt forced at first – the actors knowing the energy and power lay ahead. At speed, “The Dig” rouses the intellect. Myths of ancient Greece are woven through, young Jamie retelling them. Stories such as of Daedalus and Icarus seem to be hints to the larger story.

Marie Kohler has created one smart play, a step or three up from whatever “regular” might be. Third Avenue Playhouse is home to such engaging fare with regularity.

Director Alexander Coddington tunes in to Marie Kohler’s heavily researched knowledge base and special techniques for telling her story. That story seems to have personal resonances (Marie Kohler tells of family experiences in mental illness in her program notes) as the play delves with detail into dilemmas with dealing with a person who is a bit off, per se. Along with Alexander Coddington, the cast is fully aboard.

Central in this production, the second for “The Dig,” is Karen Moeller. She is on stage every moment as Mattie flows from narrator to the persona, through time, of the daughter of a mine owner in Galena, Illinois. Mattie’s achieving brother inspires her admiration and love. Karen Moeller expresses oh so much as she plays out childhood joys with young Jamie and the desperation, disappointment and frustrating challenges of older Jamie, he of the cart (mind) with awfully wobbly wheels.

Christopher Sheard also is on every moment presenting not only stages in Young Jamie’s life but vividly enacting characters of Grecian myths. Christopher Sheard covers all bases in going from youthful joys to the shards of breakdown.

Peter Reeves also is on every moment in the one phase of the older Jamie, addled but not totally broken in mind. His is a haunting presence – mostly just sitting vacantly. Then, when visited, he springs to life in words, actions and manner that are just beyond the reach of comprehension. It’s a stop/START role expertly presented by Peter Reeves.

Wearing coats of many colors are William Bolz and Eva Nimmer. Each plays multiple characters of different looks, behaviors and voices – something of a primer of acting versatility. Among William Bolz’s juicy parts is that of the wizened peddler of artifacts. Among Eva Nimmer’s special touches is a scolding that Jamie’s ex-wife gives herself under her breath after exhaustively explaining what she experienced the day Jamie’s mind went south.

Side note: While Eva Nimmer is acting in dramatic roles in “The Dig,” the musical comedy “Dairy Heirs” that she co-wrote and performed cheerily in last year is in a reprise run this summer at Northern Sky Theater up the road, as they say. Interesting turn.

The material of “The Dig” is quite dense – academia, archaeology, recent Middle Eastern history, Greek myth, marriage dynamics, ethics with artifacts, international quandaries and sanity and not sanity. That all that is in one play is something of a feat. Plus, the material is presented with theatrical techniques that enhance the storytelling.

Marie Kohler gives audiences plenty to think about, which can be exhilarating.