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STAGE REVIEW

A tempest on home front in 'Sussman Variations'

By **Don Aucoin** | GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 06, 2012



BOSTON PLAYWRIGHTS' THEATRE

Ken Baltin as Charlie and Erin Cole as Janey in "The Sussman Variations."

In the world according to Charlie Sussman, it's always about him.

Or so it seems to Charlie's two adult children, who have brought plenty of emotional baggage to the Connecticut home their father shares with his second wife as they prepare to celebrate, or at least observe, Dad's 75th birthday.

Family conflict is a much-charted piece of dramatic territory, and it can't be said

that Richard Schotter breaks a whole lot of new ground with “The Sussman Variations,” now at Boston Playwrights’ Theatre under the direction of Jeff Zinn.

Nonetheless, “Variations” is a generally admirable addition to a crowded category. While the play is overly schematic and its themes are too baldly stated, Schotter is very perceptive about the push and pull of relationships within families, that complex minuet in which power struggles surface out of nowhere and patterns of behavior are replicated from generation to generation.

It’s telling that the rebellious tantrums of “middlescence” seem not all that different from those of adolescence in “Variations,” where the moral high ground proves to be a precarious location.

With characters drawn from the ranks of the intelligentsia and the culturati, much of “Variations” feels like post-“Annie Hall” Woody Allen, for good and ill. Zinn makes skillful use of the play’s musical interludes to measure off emotional distance or intimacy, especially in a buoyant duet between Charlie (Ken Baltin) and his teenage granddaughter that speaks volumes about their shared affinity for theater. (The original music is by Phil Schroeder, with lyrics by Schotter).

The granddaughter, winningly portrayed by Boston University student Lauren Thomas, is named Miranda, one of numerous allusions to Shakespeare’s “The Tempest” in “Variations.” The play revolves around “Tempest”-y issues of parental control and the use of creative powers, and features the appearance of an Ariel-like, green-haired youth who is nicknamed, perhaps inevitably, Zephyr, and is amusingly portrayed by Harrison Brian, another BU student.

The Prospero of this stormy household is Charlie, who is, or rather was, a renowned Broadway composer. Neither of his children, Jonathan (Steven Barkhimer) and Janey (Erin Cole), has forgiven Charlie for leaving their mother two decades earlier. It is no coincidence that they have made their homes 3,000 miles away, in California, or that Janey has never discussed an important aspect of her life with her father. On this visit, in fact, she is withholding a significant piece of news from him.

As played by Baltin, Charlie exudes the dissatisfied restlessness of a man unmellowed by age and disinclined to rest on his laurels, which include two Tony Awards. So he sits at his piano, hard at work on a new score. "This one's a winner," he tells Jonathan. "Gonna put me back on the map."

Charlie is one of those exasperating people who always finds a way to steer the subject to himself, no matter the topic of conversation. When Jonathan tells his father he has just been chosen over two dozen other scholars to be editor of a new annotated edition of "The Tempest," Charlie's response is not to congratulate his son but to suggest that he turn it into a musical: "I can see it now: 'The Tempest: A Storm-Tossed Musical Fantasy.'"

Jonathan seethes at his father's egocentricity, but the son has more in common with the old man than he'd like to admit. Just ask his fed-up wife, Deirdre (Laura Latreille), a concert pianist who has apparently subordinated her career to Jonathan's, or their daughter, Miranda, whom Jonathan is constantly pressuring to write her college essay so she can apply for early admission to Yale.

The stabilizing presence in this pressure-cooker environment is Charlie's second wife, Margery (Cheryl McMahan, excellent). Her fastidious touch is evident in the Sussman home (given an aura of cozy domesticity by set designer Cristina Todesco), but Margery also is capable of a matter-of-fact bluntness that's reminiscent of Pearl, the character played by Maureen Stapleton in Allen's 1978 "Interiors."

Margery's fiercely protective attitude toward her husband seems to stem from more than concern about his heart problems; it suggests there might be more to Charlie than we see on his vain surface. By the end, "Variations" has provided us with a useful reminder that we can never know the full truth of another person's life.

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