

Review: Love, faith and cancer drive new play in Berkeley

By Sam Hurwitt, Correspondent | San Jose Mercury News

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It's a budding romance in which there's always a third wheel. In Inferno Theatre's new play "Female, Ashkenazi with a Sewing Machine," written by managing director Jamie Greenblatt, Anna (sympathetically overwhelmed Melissa Clason) and Benjamin (beatific Benoit Monin) are giddy with new love, but it's never just the two of them.

There's Benjamin's Judaism, which Anna is eager to explore despite the fact that she's somehow never even heard of matzo ball soup. There's Anna's sewing machine, her oldest friend and confidant, that she says raised her instead of her disinterested adoptive parents. There's their mutual yearning for a child that does not come. Most of all, there's Anna's cancer diagnosis, which soon eclipses everything else.

Her condition also tells her that maybe there's a reason that Jews always assume she's Jewish, which she didn't think she was. As the play teaches us, one in 40 Ashkenazi Jewish women have a gene mutation present that puts them especially at risk for ovarian cancer. Maybe her unknown birth mother passed down more than just that sewing machine.

The tale is told in an elliptical, semi-mythical manner. Crystal Brown kicks things off as an impish, otherworldly not-quite-narrator, not telling the story so much as making mysterious pronouncements about it and her role in it. As young love blooms, she watches with glee, singing a quirkily operatic rendition of "The K-I-S-S-I-N-G Song." (When we first meet Anna and Benjamin, they actually are sitting in a tree.) Accompanied by an equally omnipresent, unspeaking fiddler (music director Carol Braves), Brown's enigmatic character takes on various roles in Anna's story, including a kindly hospital chaplain, a soaring bird, the idly curious spirit of Anna's birth mother, someone pulling organs out of Anna with grotesque enthusiasm and finally the alternately welcoming and punishingly stern spirit of her first Ashkenazi ancestor.

In a grand, spacious room in South Berkeley Community Church, adorned by hardly any set, Inferno producing artistic director Giulio Cesare Perrone gives the play an intriguingly ritualistic, stripped-down and movement-oriented staging, with lots of use of long, flowing cloths.

Being a stitcher is central to Anna's identity. She says she comes from a long line of stitchers, though she can't possibly know that, and she's always working on a quilt that comes no nearer to completion. Benjamin feels similarly strongly about his calling as a gardener, but that's not as relevant to the play. His vocation takes a back seat to his religious heritage and his love for Anna.

Greenblatt's script is densely packed with metaphor and mysticism, with lines such as, "I like the dank, mysterious spaces of life's transitional zones." That lends itself well to the sometimes fairy-tale quality of the storytelling, but it sometimes makes it difficult to follow. Increasingly, as the play goes on, it becomes difficult to ascertain what's going on — who's still around or not, what if anything to take literally, and what some of the metaphorical journey is meant to represent. The ending, draped in compelling imagery, is particularly cryptic.

It's a story of intense pain — emotional, physical and spiritual — and that can make it hard to watch at times. Sometimes seemingly beneficent otherworldly beings take a cruel turn that seems all the harsher because the switch is unfathomable, almost out of nowhere. In a way, though,

navigating the capricious twists that life throws you is what the play is all about, and “Female” deals with them in a compellingly imaginative way.

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Jim Norrena/Inferno Theatre

From left, Crystal Brown, Melissa Clason and Carol Braves perform in “Female, Ashkenazi with a Sewing Machine” at Inferno Theatre.