

Childhood's end

Kids anchor Neil Simon's "Memoirs"

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The Volcano; Published September 13, 2011

Eugene Morris Jerome has reached that critical age at which he realizes other people have inner lives - that the members of his family are complicated humans with individual concerns, rather than just costars in the Eugene Jerome Story. His family's going through a lot in September, 1937: His parents took in a widowed aunt and her daughters, and scarcely earn enough money to pay rent. Jobs are fragile and hard to come by. Each newscast evokes the specter of war and persecution in Europe. Eugene's dad suffers an understandable heart attack by the end of Act I. The poor kid couldn't have picked a more worrisome time to come of age, but he makes for a plucky narrator all the same. "I love tense moments," he admits, "especially when I'm not the one they're all tense about."



There are stage veterans who scoff at Neil Simon, but I'm not among them. It'd be easier to dismiss his career if 21st century theaters boasted a humorist with even half the quality of his résumé. That said, Simon was always more gifted at writing jokes (a talent honed in 1950s TV) than crafting genuine pathos. His first major attempt at autobiography, *Chapter Two*, falls flat at each attempt at marital conflict. *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, penned six years later, is more ambitious than *Chapter Two*, but whiffs at as many pitches as it hits. What was probably his most heartfelt material seems, more often than not, manufactured instead of observed.

So there's that. But as I watched Capital Playhouse's production of *Brighton*, its first attempt at a straight (non-musical) play, I was struck by the number of balls Simon keeps in the air. Each character, including all four kids, has depth and purpose. We find ourselves rooting for Eugene's overstressed family to tough it out, and by the end of a long play, 2011 starts to look like an easy year indeed.

I admired director Brian Tyrrell's work on *Rabbit Hole* at Harlequin, and although this show isn't as judiciously paced, it demonstrates considerable talent with actors. That's especially true of Tyrrell's work with his youngest cast members. *Brighton* rests on its narrator's shoulders, but Jackson Jones is ready for Eugene. His work builds on a similar lead role in *Unexpected Tenderness* earlier this year. He wields considerable innate presence and comedic sincerity.

Kate Anders is on point throughout as a malingering cousin, and Jacob Hoff is suitably intense as Eugene's brother. (Hoff and Jackson share the play's funniest scene, in which birds and bees are discussed with adolescent fervor.) Unfortunately, despite clever character choices, I found it impossible to buy Megan Tyrrell as a 16-year-old, but Ted Ryle was cast well as Eugene's exhausted father. It's a treat to watch him play a fully naturalistic character in a rare appearance outside Olympia Family Theater, of which he was the founding board president.

Matt Lawrence's lighting transitions feel obtrusive in Act I, but Bruce Haas's set is richly detailed. It feels lived in for decades. Emily Popp's costumes are homey as well, and special credit to Dennis Kurtz and Kris Mann for finding all those exceptional period props. It was smart of Capital Playhouse to launch its "Act II" project with Simon's ambitious autobiography. Their house Friday could've been bigger; but the overall artistic success of this production bodes well for *Fiction*, a contemporary effort by Denver playwright Steven Dietz (*Lonely Planet*), arriving in early April. I await it eagerly.