

## BWW Reviews: South Coast Rep Debuts Witty World Premiere Play OF GOOD STOCK

 by Michael L. Quintos April 14



[Melanie Lora](#), [Andrea Sygdlowski](#), Kat Foster

"Family... is so f--king weird!"

Well, that is pretty much how playwright [Melissa Ross](#)---via one of her unabashedly expletive-spewing characters---summarizes the concept of family dynamics in the world premiere production of her enjoyably satisfying new play **OF GOOD STOCK**, currently on stage at Costa Mesa's Tony Award-winning [South Coast Repertory](#) through April 26. After a well-received reading at last year's Pacific Playwrights Festival, the dramedy has now been mounted into a full-fledged production featuring a strikingly impressive Cape Cod set designed by [Tony Fanning](#) and brisk direction by [Gaye Taylor](#) Upchurch.

Filled with relatable humor and wit, and plenty of fiercely sarcastic dialogue and gasp-lite melodrama, the play explores the layered, often contentious relationship between a trio of sisters who have decided to gather together at their family's gorgeous ocean-side summer home for a little weekend reunion, with their respective beaus in tow. Naturally---at least from what we've observed in the world of fiction and, possibly, even in real life---such family gatherings aren't all just smiles, meals, and reminiscing. You certainly can't have a reunion without a bit of volatile fireworks---which, in this case, involve a colorful explosion of shocking revelations, long-dormant frustrations, and deep-seeded resentments.

Like countless other comedies and dramas that have explored the complicated relationships between siblings (particularly between three aggressively opinionated, type-a sisters), **OF GOOD STOCK** dives into familiar

territory with a lot of recognizable traits that many of us have seen before: here we have three sisters with three very distinct personalities that often clash with each other; they have parents (or at least one parent) they all fight each other for attention; and, lastly, they are skeptical and highly judgmental of each others' choices---partly out of genuine love, partly out of years and years of long-held anger or even jealousy.



[Rob Nagle](#), [Melanie Lora](#)

In a sense, we've all met these sisters before and we can kind of predict every quirk and nuance of their behavioral outbursts and impassioned arguments, all of which come with years of baggage. But don't let that familiarity dissuade you from seeing this engrossing play. Because at its core, *OF GOOD STOCK* is an absorbing, thoughtful, engaging story that doesn't bore or reduce you to eye-rolls (well, maybe a few, but for a good cause). And who doesn't enjoy a little voyeuristic look at a family with lots of skeletons to unearth and shouting matches to battle out?

Ah, yes. The Stockton sisters. There's that saying that you can't choose the family you're born into... You're basically "stuck" with them, warts and all. That is essentially how the sisters are with each other---yes, they seemingly love each other, but, boy, they certainly have mounds of resentment and bitterness just waiting to burst to the surface. Well, nothing that a few glasses of vintage scotch couldn't ease for a bit, of course.

The title, it so happens, refers to how the family patriarch, the now dearly departed Mick Stockton---a celebrated author with a penchant for naughty vices---used to characterize his girls: that they're *of good stock*... of good breeding, of good quality. Already that label---not to mention this amazing summer house in Cape Cod overlooking the ocean---speaks volumes of the Stockton girls' upper-class, high-brow upbringing and the kind of expectations the sisters had to live up to in their family. It also foreshadows the kind of whiny, first-world problems that trouble them so now as adults.

The eldest of the three sisters, Jess ([Melanie Lora](#)), is, as one would expect, the level-headed, responsible one of the bunch. She's on the brink of celebrating her 41st birthday on this particular weekend---a milestone date considering her own mother didn't live past that age due to cancer, an ailment that, sadly, she too has inherited. Nonetheless, she's taken on the responsibility of not only overseeing the legacy of their famous dad---whose stories are being coveted by Hollywood studios---but also taking care of their family's oceanside home that she solely inherited, all while suffering through the debilitating effects of chemotherapy.

Lucky for her, Jess is married to the sweet, stalwart Fred ([Rob Nagle](#)), a kind, funny guy that happens to be significantly older than her (yet has a rather juvenile attachment to patchwork pants). The two have known each other since Jess was rather young, because at one time, Fred was once Jess' father's protégé, who then later fell in love with the boss' kid. Now, Fred is a droll food writer that dotes attentively on his wife, much to her slight protestations. It's clear that Fred is about as loyal to Jess as you can possibly hope one would be while suffering through such a horrible ailment.

The youngest Stockton sis, Celia ([Andrea Syglowski](#)) is a bohemian chic wild-child that seems to march to the beat of her own drum. Predictably, she is flighty, quite outspoken and debate-prone, and drawn to activities for a limited amount of time before finding interest in something else. Thus, when Fred and Jess discuss

[Andrea Syglowski](#), [Todd Lowe](#)

Celia's news that she is bringing over a new boyfriend for the weekend, there is lots of skepticism in the air---particularly when they learn that the guy, bearded lumbersexual Hunter ([Todd Lowe](#)), is way older than Celia, but is still languishing as an advanced-aged college undergraduate.



Smack-dab in the middle child position is hoity-toity Amy (Kat Foster), a WASP-y, high-powered uptight queen bee with an impeccable designer wardrobe and a designer fiancé, Josh ([Corey Brill](#)) to match. Together, the engaged couple---an

upper-crust Ken and Barbie---is the very epitome of posh, upper-class white privilege, the 1-percenters you love to hate and would like to see knocked off their high horses and experience a downward spiral (Spoiler Alert: they sort of do). Her sisters, naturally, find her a bit more obnoxious than usual, most especially since her impending nuptials have turned her into your typical "bride-zilla."

When Fred later goes off on an errand with Josh in tow, Fred wonders out loud what is it about the disagreeable Amy that Josh finds suitable to marry.

"She's hot!" Josh declares, matter-of-factly. A handful, yes, but, yep, she's hot.

Celia, meanwhile, sums up Amy thusly: "I love her... I just wish I *liked* her." Ouch.



[Rob Nagle](#), [Corey Brill](#)

And therein lies the biggest surprise hiccup I took away from *OF GOOD STOCK*: the presence of a character---one of three at the heart of the play---that remains unlikable throughout the story. It's actually quite a jolt of surprise that I didn't see coming.

In essence, the play has painted Amy as nothing more than a spoiled bitch from hell that, perhaps, deserves whatever comeuppance is in store. She certainly makes it hard to root for her. As presented, Amy is truly just an adult that is still a middle child at heart that never *really* got her way and continues to behave as such---even though

she is clearly living a comfortably wealthy life now.

Sure, she probably always had to fight her way to gain favor with her parents who may have seemingly favored her other sisters. It's standard-issue middle-child protestations that eventually prompted her to go find her own bliss---and when she eventually achieves it, she is still always making sure her sisters acknowledge *her* success and accomplishments. It's no wonder she is still livid with the fact that the house was bequeathed only to Jess, even though Jess insists the house is all theirs equally. DRAMA!

So when Amy later finally shows a tiny hint of vulnerability and makes a not-so-shocking confession to her sisters (including a tearful declaration of her fear of losing her sister to cancer), it is, frankly, at least for me, too little too late to reverse her into a likable character---at least in *this* draft of this world premiere play. I suppose, ultimately, the shock is discovering that the writer doesn't allow this woman any ounce of goodness or redemption. She remains a joke, drinking quietly in the corner while her other family members go about their lives.

Perhaps *that's* the fresh approach OF GOOD STOCK is aiming for in its presentation of a familiar scenario of three sisters in a play!



[Melanie Lora](#), [Todd Lowe](#), [Andrea Syglowski](#), [Rob Nagle](#)

But, overall, though, OF GOOD STOCK is an excellent addition to the extensive library of other sibling-centric comedy-dramas that dissect the intricacies of these kinds of relationships. Interestingly, though? The play also chooses to shine a very bright spotlight on the specific "outsiders" that have somehow been able to worm their way into this enclave.

Sure, scandalous family drama and bickering shouting matches between catty sisters aren't anything new in theater, but the play does present a fresh, thoroughly engaging narrative that allows an additional motif to be examined: exactly *what kind of men* end up with the kind of women presented here in the first place.

The screaming, overlapping dialogue Ross uses is actually quite naturalistic and highly indicative of the kind of relationship these sisters have with each other---quite possibly an after-effect of growing up in a home where they found themselves always fighting for dominance, attention, and to simply be heard above the noise by the main male figure in their life. At one time it was their father, a gifted man who often succumbed to his demons; now they are "loved" by a certain kind of man that embrace and/or tolerate their specific Stockton traits, traits shaped very much by the father that raised them.

But as freely expressive the sisters are in OF GOOD STOCK, they also come off quite grating at times---while the men in their lives, by contrast, come off rather less flawed. I'm not sure if this was intentional, but it made for a more layered dynamic.



[Andrea Syglowski](#), [Melanie Lora](#)

Jess, obviously, hit the jackpot landing a guy like Fred---and the audience is completely on board thanks to some great acting work by Nagle, who does a great job selling his character as the likable EveryMan. At times sweet, at times protective, and at other times a court jester, Nagle's Fred is almost the fantasy version of what someone like Jess needs to survive the day-to-day ailments of life with cancer and, above all, to feel truly loved and supported in every which way. Though Jess---performed with grace and empathetic nuance by Lora---sometimes cracks under the pressure and takes it out on Fred, she can't help but feel that at least *this* part of her life---the part that involves Fred---is going right.

Celia, too has earned her own "Fred" as well in Hunter, a surprise for everyone including Celia. As such, actors Syglowski and Lowe have an easy, palpable chemistry---and are quite convincing as a couple of intelligent, thoughtful, partially radical misfits that have found one another. I suppose Amy and Josh are suitably matched as well in their own right---and Foster and Brill seem impressively committed to their characters' filthy rich, better-than-y'all outward aura (On a side note, I was fangirling a bit while watching the play considering I just watched Brill's character on the hit series *The Walking Dead* get killed off rather violently a few weeks ago---and now here he is dressed like a posh, clean-cut Kennedy without a hint of crazy or blood stains).



Simply put, all six featured actors definitely elevate *OF GOOD STOCK* to a higher plain---which, with its two engaging acts and that oh-so-gorgeous set, has a pretty great view already. Pass the scotch!

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Photos by Debora Robinson/SCR.

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*Performances of the World Premiere production of *OF GOOD STOCK* continue at [South Coast Repertory](http://www.scr.org) through April 26, 2015. Tickets can be purchased online at [www.scr.org](http://www.scr.org), by phone at (714) 708-5555 or by visiting the box office at 655 Town Center Drive in Costa Mesa.*

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