

Review Plenty of bite in 'Of Good Stock,' but a soft heart lurks within

By **MARGARET GRAY**

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South Coast Repertory's generosity to new playwrights has a fairy godmother-like charm. The company commissioned a play from the relatively unknown writer Melissa Ross and has mounted a lavish, gorgeous world premiere production of it.

I would love to live in the Cape Cod house designed by Tony Fanning for "Of Good Stock": It twirls onstage in segments that click into place, then politely retreats to the sidelines so as not to block the ocean view.

If the play itself, a family melodrama that tries on the poisonous humor of "August: Osage County" but can't disguise a much softer heart, often feels prepackaged and overwrought — well, it's a play, after all.

The rising director Gaye Taylor Upchurch has met the challenge of Ross' stylized dialogue with a heightened performance style that borders, at moments, on shtick. It's very loud. Not everybody will appreciate being yelled at by these adorable or (depending on where you're sitting) overly emotive people.

At the performance I attended, during an especially abrasive sequence in which three women drunkenly shout expletives into the audience, a lady sitting a few rows ahead of me got up and left.

These three women at the center of the story are the daughters of the late Mick Stockton, a womanizing novelist in a Norman Mailer mode. (The one title that we learn, "Eulogy for a Butcher," sends up the high-testosterone style of that literary colossus.)

Their mother died young. The oldest sister, Jess (Melanie Lora), her father's favorite, inherited his Cape Cod summerhouse, married his protégé and now guards his legacy.

When the play opens, Jess and her husband, Fred (Rob Nagle), are preparing for the arrival of her younger sisters and their boyfriends to celebrate her 41st birthday. The couple's jokey, anxious banter about the impending personalities forecasts a bumpy weekend — and hints at fissures in their own marriage.

The sisters arrive one at a time and unpack their resentments, issues and predicaments. The flighty, cynical baby of the family, Celia (Andrea Syglowski), has a history of short-lived passions, so things don't look promising for her new flame, affable, bearded Hunter (Todd Lowe), "the world's oldest undergraduate."

Amy (Kat Foster), the middle child, is a micromanaging harpy whose upcoming wedding has turned her into "Bridezilla Barbie." Her fiancé, Josh (Corey Brill), may resemble a perfect catalog-ordered groom, but he's coming apart at the seams.

The reunion, oiled with Scotch, leads to upsetting revelations, the airing of grievances, clumsy tenderesses, profane screams and forgiving ruminations that volley across the stage in a zany, often very funny cacophony. Although the scenario is Chekhovian, the fast-paced dialogue evokes more recent influences like David Mamet, Tracy Letts and the self-conscious heroines of TV's "Girls."

Ross' characters are drawn with assurance, wit and gentle mockery — we definitely have met these people — but can seem a little glib. The boyfriends, essentially plot mechanisms, don't require many dimensions. Unfortunately, Amy is also a flat, sitcom-y caricature whose shrill, phony exclamations give way to caustic put-downs and drunken self-pity. Perhaps designed as comic relief, she feels underwritten or even extraneous.

In any case, the sisters' rapport, which gets a lot of stage time, is not the real focus of this play. That gradually reveals itself to be Fred's struggle to prove himself worthy of the troubled Jess. To win back his princess from her emotional tower, he tackles the prosaic heroic tests of our era, such as putting up with weepy sisters-in-law, cooking and shutting off the smoke alarm.



The story's emotional payoff, therefore, hinges on Rob Nagle, an engaging if hammy actor who, especially in the first act, overdoes it a bit. But his fierce commitment to the role, like Fred's to Jess, ultimately wins us over.

"Of Good Stock," South Coast Repertory, 655 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa. 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, 2:30 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. Sundays. Ends April 26. \$22 and up. (714) 708-5555 or www.scr.org. Running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes.

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