

'Of Good Stock' captures sisterly love, rivalry

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Nobody can get under your skin quite like your brother or sister. Sometimes the zingers are an indication of rivalry. Sometimes they're a way of showing affection. But no matter their origin, they always hit the part of you that hurts the most.

The toxic world of sisterly relationships is the high-revving motor that propels "Of Good Stock," a rollicking and bittersweet new play by Melissa Ross making its world premiere on South Coast Repertory's Segerstrom Stage. Anyone with sibs will find the antics of the three Stockton women painfully familiar. A simple get-together to celebrate the 41st birthday of the oldest, Jess (Melanie Lora), turns into a messy,

booze-stoked free-for-all that unearths a lifetime of unhealed wounds, resentments and old rivalries.

Jess and her younger sisters Amy (Kat Foster) and Celia (Andrea Syglowski) would probably fight about the color of the sky, but there are some pretty solid issues propelling their prickly conflicts on this particular summer weekend at Jess' cozy Cape Cod home.

Jess, stoic yet fragile, is battling cancer. Amy, a glib narcissist, is planning her wedding to Josh (Corey Brill), an equally shallow person who seems a little uneasy about the pending nuptials. Celia, the youngest, has found Mr. Right, a shaggy, sweet and simple guy named Hunter Walker (Todd Lowe), and early in the play she announces her plans to move to his Montana home and help finance his construction business. Her sisters are dubious – Celia goes through men like Kleenex.

A major unseen character hovers over this dysfunctional scene: the ghost of the women's father, Mick Stockton, a famous novelist whose life was as messy as the estate and legacy that he left to his girls (their mother died of cancer at 40 – the reason this birthday is so poignant for Jess).

At the beginning of the story, Jess looks at yet another Hollywood offer to turn one of her dad's novels into a movie.

"You should just do it. He's dead. He can't get mad at you," says Jess' husband, Fred (Rob Nagle), who's her equal in curmudgeonliness.

"Not my art. Not my choice," she responds, throwing the offer in the recycling bin.

Jess is the guardian of her father's legacy. He left control of his work and his Cape Cod home to her, and that choice has cut deep with her sisters, especially Amy. "There is a house. It belonged to our father. He's dead. She owns it. We do not. Right? Am I right?" she asks rhetorically to Celia.

The emotional temperature rises with each newly opened bottle of wine (and later, Mick's expensive 40-year-old Scotch). At times, there's an overly familiar feel to the way the conflict plays out. The sisters aren't sufficiently nuanced, and it's clear that all this bluster is leading to a second-act catharsis.

That event, though, is worth seeing. Jess, Amy and Celia indulge in an epic seaside rant that somehow addresses their many issues, reveals their underlying love for each other, and finally unleashes the emotional devastation surrounding Jess' mortality. It's a transformative moment for Amy – suddenly the least likable sister is the story's most achingly tragic character – and Foster will break your heart. In a brilliant instant, the performer makes you realize that Amy's glib self-absorption is a brittle carapace covering a broken heart.

Ross is a generous playwright, and every performer is given a scene or two to reveal secrets.

Lora understands that Jess desperately needs to cling to her caretaker role as a way to go on; her scenes with Nagle are beautifully layered and filled with unspoken tension. Syglowski has fun playing a woman who indulges in her little-sister irresponsibility but realizes that it's finally time to grow up. Lowe plays a folksy, easygoing man who seems like an emotionally healthy version of his most famous TV character, "True Blood's" twitchy war vet Terry Bellefleur. Brill is enjoyable as a none-to-bright guy who suddenly realizes he's making a huge mistake. And Nagle brings wisdom and ruffled affability to Fred, a food writer whose years of experience with the warring sisters has taught him how to ride out the rough spots.

Everything unfolds naturalistically on Tony Fanning's beautiful set, which transforms efficiently from Cape Cod kitchen to back yard to roadside and ocean side. David Kay Mickelsen's costumes give us plenty of hints about character. Director Gaye Taylor Upchurch finds ways to navigate through the story's occasional dead spots; though the show's running time is only slightly more than two hours, the script seems slightly padded. With sisterly catfights, a little bit goes a long way and too much can be excruciating to watch. It starts to feel too much like real life.

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