

Of Good Stock Theatre Review – A Fine “Stock” of Laughter and Tears

By Peter A. Balaskas



Fred (Rob Nagle) reasons with Jess (Melanie Lora)

(Costa Mesa, CA) April, 2015 – The bond between sisters is truly a dynamic thing, more so than between brothers. All facets of that connection seem to be...intensified. If the sisters care for each other, their mutual love and loyalty are extremely evident. If they despise each other, their loathing is... well, the same. Meanwhile, the men in their lives witness these displays of emotion and wonder, “What the hell is going here?” Regardless, the relationship between two sisters is something to behold. But playwright **Melissa Ross** explores the tumultuous connection between three sisters in her latest work “**Of Good Stock**,” which was a critical favorite at **South Coast Repertory Pacific Playwright’s Festival** last year and is now having its world premiere on the **Segerstrom Main Stage**. And the results are nothing but phenomenal. Thanks to the brilliant cast and **Gaye Taylor Upchurch’s** visionary direction, playwright **Melissa Ross’s** dramatic voice is one of the strongest at **SCR**.



Hunter (Todd Lowe) calms Celia (Andrea Syglowski)

It's a memorable celebration for the three daughters of the late legendary novelist Mick Stockton at his Cape Cod house. It's a birthday get together for the eldest sister Jess (**Melanie Lora**), who experiences pressure in not only being her father's favorite, but is also suffering from treatments of breast cancer. The only foundation she has is her down-to-earth food author husband Fred (**Rob Nagle**), who instinctively has the magic touch to calm her biorhythms. Also celebrating is the engagement of Jess's needy sister Amy(**Kat Foster**) and her fiancé, Josh (**Corey Brill**), who has no idea what's in store for him. Lastly, wild child sister Celia (**Andrea Syglowski**) is also celebrating because of a secret that involves latest beau Hunter (**Todd Lowe**). With all of these factors, as well as the free-flowing application of their favorite scotch, all are revealed in unexpected ways.



Fred (Rob Nagle) listens to Josh (Corey Brill)

“Of Good Stock” debuted at **SCR's Pacific Playwright's Festival (PPF)** last year, and out of the four works that were read there, her play was the strongest and received the highest critical response from the audience attending the event throughout that weekend. **Ross's** talent for dialogue and character is one of the most prominent and dynamic that **SCR** has brought within its fold. As far as “**Stock**” is concerned, her sisters leap off the page in their own unique ways, especially showing a lot of humor and poignancy. But that humor segues to anger when topics of envy and rejection come into the picture, cumulating in a drunken rant near the end of the play where the “F” bomb is screamed by the sisters almost 100 times within 5-7 minutes period; a few of the audience left during this part of the play, illustrating that this weak moment in **Ross's** work should have been trimmed down since its debut at PPF. However, this flaw doesn't hamper the overall work, especially since she doesn't fall into the trap of demonizing all the men in her play...except **Brill's** callow and superficial Josh, who is hilarious when he realizes that he is in WAY over his head with Amy. **Ross** creates Hunter and especially Fred with much depth and sympathy without feminizing or castrating them. Neither man will take any guff from

their significant others, but will unconditionally love them through their challenges. And **Ross's** dramatic voice is a fine match for **Upchurch's** fluidic direction, which is enhanced by **Tony Fanning's** morph-like set design that beautifully moves and transforms on the stage from the Cape Cod house full interior, half interior/half exterior to a secluded road in Cape Cod. Both director and scenic design create an exceptional world that matches the imagination of **Ross's** story.



Three sisters together: Jess (Melanie Lora), Celia (Andrea Syglowski) and Amy (Kat Foster)

The performances bring additional magic to **Ross's** words and characters. **Nagle's** Fred is the true star of this play by contrasting his flabby, coach-potato physicality with his subtle insight and wisdom, compassion and dry humor. There were two instances where his line delivery was so perfect in humor and timing that he was the only artist to receive an individual applause during the play. He was a nice supporting player in last year's "**Rest**" and he shows his chops as an excellent lead in "**Stock.**" **Nagle** provides a stable foundation to **Lora's** Jess, whose emotional fragility is masterfully shown as the thought of dying and leaving her beloved husband alone becomes a cross she can barely hold up. Their chemistry is a powerful one, intensifying their moments together from beginning to end. **Syglowski** steals almost every scene as Celia, whose razor-sharp wit matches a vulnerability regarding the new stage in her life. When she gets pissed off, her comments are unmerciful, powerful zingers that leave nothing behind. She also is a good match for **Lowe's** Hunter, who is so adorable and likable that he is reminiscent of an earthy, laid back teddy bear. But **Lowe** shows much strength when he defends his love for Celia to Jess, putting much water to the flames of her cynicism. And **Foster's** shrilly and whiny Amy is much to behold, combining side-splitting needy insecurity with an envious rage that grounds the character from being a caricature.

Ross has proven to be a fine addition to **SCR's** lineup of evolving playwrights. It will be interesting what her path will be regarding her future works. Hopefully, they will all make their debuts at **South Coast Repertory**, and that they will be just as successful as "**Of Good Stock.**"

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Of Good Stock runs from March 27-April 26, 2015

South Coast Repertory: Segerstrom Stage

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Photos by **Deborah Robinson**