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STEVEN STANLEY'S STAGESCENELA.COM: SPOTLIGHTING THE BEST IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA THEATER

OF GOOD STOCK

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WOW!

"Sisters. Sisters. There were never such devoted sisters," warbles one of the three female siblings created by playwright Melissa Ross in her crowd-pleasing new comedy *Of Good Stock*, though considering the squabbling going on in their Cape Cod family home at this weekend's summer family reunion, "devoted" might not be the first word that comes to mind when describing the oh-so dysfunctionally bound Jess, Amy, and Celia.



It's thanks to the impending 41st birthday of oldest sister Jess (Melanie Lora), married to Fred (Rob Nagle), that middle sis Amy (Kat Foster) and her fiancé Josh (Corey Brill), and baby sister Celia (Andrea Syglowski), and her new boyfriend, recent college grad Hunter (Todd Lowe), have come back to the homestead to roost and ruminate over past hurts both real and imagined.

It's been a tough year for Jess and Fred as the eldest of the Stockton girls battles the same illness that took her own mother's life at forty, and though things might seem to be going more smoothly for Amy and Celia, neither can quite forgive their late novelist father for having willed the house where they spent their formative summers to their older sis. And this is not the only instance of "Dad/Mom always liked you best" that we'll hear over the course of *In Good Stock's* 24-hour time frame.



Growing up the daughters of as renowned (and complicated) a man as their dad couldn't have been easy for the girls, particularly for the younger two, who bore the added burden of having to spend summers with that most hated of creatures, an evil stepmother, a fate Jess avoided by having left home for college.

Ross's funny, perceptive, ultimately quite moving script, the latest in a string of illustrious South Coast Repertory World Premieres, allows us to get to know the Stanton Sisters over the course of a single planetary revolution, and if Jess, Amy, and Celia are strangers when we meet them, by the end of Act Two, they—and the men in their lives—are folks we've come to know, understand, and care about. If ever there were a play that you didn't quite want to see end, *Of Good Stock* is that play.



I'm not sure how closely Ross's own family resembles the Stocktons, but even if the playwright grew up an only child with two loving, still-living parents, her latest play unfolds with absolute authenticity. Not only are her characters fully fleshed out, her often overlapping dialog sounds the furthest thing from scripted, particularly as performed by as fine a cast as even the most discerning audience member could wish for.



New York-based director Gaye

Taylor Upchurch shares credit for her cast's superb work. (Thanks once again to casting director Joanne DeNaut, CSA, and South Coast Repertory for casting locally.) Not only that, but Upchurch's multiple directorial touches deserve notice, particularly an inspired decision to have Stanton sisters play out an entire wordless scene inside the house as the men in their lives have lengthy scripted dialog outdoors.

Lora and Nagle are two of our most treasured regulars on both regional and 99-seat SoCal stages, and though In Good Stock has them performing opposite each other for the first time, their work here has the truthful ring of a couple with a twenty-five year history. Nagle could not be more delightful in Fred's irascible moments, nor more powerful when digging deep into the heart of a man facing the possible if not probable loss of a beloved spouse. As for Lora, the radiant stage star does her finest work since SCR's Collected Stories as a woman battling for her life, and for her husband to acknowledge the very real possibility of her impending death.

Foster gets to be wonderfully pouty and peeved in early scenes, then dazzles as Amy's only shallowly repressed anger and resentment reach the surface, and Syglowski is every bit as terrific in her role as the ditziest of the three, most impressively so when the youngest Stockton girl reveals waters we did not know were there.

Stealth weapon Lowe proves a subtle scene stealer as fish-out-of-water Montanan Hunter (not quite the early-20something Ross's script leads us initially to believe), and Brill does his accustomed fine work as Josh, whom Ross has the chutzpah to ... (Sorry, no spoilers allowed.)



Scenic designer Tony Fanning's

gorgeous set does amazingly mobile things, allowing us to see the Stanton home from just about every possible angle in addition to giving us the expansive yard outside its doors.



Bradley King's lighting is as stunning as indoor-outdoor lighting designs get, David Kay Mickelsen's costumes reflect each character's choices to perfection, and Darron L West's sound design is equally splendid. In other words, if one of the perks of seeing a show at South Coast Repertory is its production design, this design is as "perky" as it gets.



Jerry Patch is dramaturg. Jackie S. Hill is production manager. Kathryn Davies is stage manager. Addition program credits include Julie Ann Renfro (assistant stage manager), Lia Sima Fakhouri (assistant director), Ryan Grossheim and Meghan Mitchell (assistant scenic designers), Kate Poppen (costume design assistant), and Charles Coes (assistant sound designer).

From King Lear to The Three Sisters to the more recent Crimes Of The Heart and The Sisters Rosensweig, female sibling trios have been a theatrical staple for centuries, and justifiably so. To this illustrious list you can now add Melissa Ross's marvelous, memorable Of Good Stock.

South Coast Repertory, 655 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa. Through April 16. Tuesdays and Wednesdays at 7:30, Thursdays and Fridays at 8:00. Saturdays and Sundays at 2:30 and 7:30. (No evening performance on April 26.) Tickets: 714 708-5555

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—Steven Stanley

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