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THEATER REVIEW: Salem State play overflows with emotion

William Cunningham’s “Small Death in a Big Country,” onstage through March 6 in the Callan Studio Theatre at Salem State University, does not intend to talk about inheritance — at least, not at the outset. On the surface, “Small Death” is the messy, boisterous tale of the Barry family, dealing with the death of a patriarch and the mental diminishment of a matriarch.

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Danielle Woods, Ted Silva, Emma Bernhardt appear in a scene from “A Small Death in a Big Country” at Salem State’s Callan Studio Theatre. Courtesy photo / Alex Portenko



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Danielle Woods, Ted Silva, Emma Bernhardt appear in a scene from "A Small Death in a Big Country" at Salem State's Callan Studio Theatre. Courtesy photo / Alex Portenko



By Keith Powers / Correspondent

Posted Mar. 3, 2016 at 2:35 AM
Updated Mar 3, 2016 at 2:36 AM

SALEM
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Posted Mar. 3, 2016 at 2:35 AM
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SALEM

If you go...

WHAT: "A Small Death in a Big Country," by William Cunningham

WHERE: Callan Studio Theatre, Salem State University, 352 Lafayette St., Salem

WHEN: through March 6

TICKETS: \$15, \$10 seniors/students. Free for Salem State students. Visit

www.salemstate.edu/arts or call 978-542-6365.

Think about inheritance. We blame our noses on it. We blame our cavities on it. We blame our hair color on it. Our addictions. Our bank accounts. Our diseases.

It can be a cycle of blame, and if we don't make our life choices just as important as what we inherit, the blame becomes toxic.

William Cunningham's "Small Death in a Big Country," onstage through March 6 in the Callan Studio Theatre at Salem State University, does not intend to talk about inheritance — at least, not at the outset. On the surface, "Small Death" is the messy, boisterous tale of the Barry family, dealing with the death of a patriarch and the mental diminishment of a matriarch.

But along the way, while trying to decide how someone dies, and who should care for whom, two parents, three siblings, assorted spouses, grandchildren and dead relatives all find a way to blame each other for their lot in life, and grumble over choices they could have made.



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Cunningham directs "Small Death" as well. It plays out in simple fashion, with small properties and limited physical acting. The actors rotate through the spotlights, carrying music stands and their manuscripts.

A chair sits center-stage, mainly for Dolly Barry (Danielle Woods) to sit in and reminisce. A grandfather clock occupies the backstage, the only real symbol. A suavely casual narrator (Jil Umejiaku), a constant presence, segues the scenes, delivering stage directions.

Mostly, it's a talk-fest. Dolly's three children — the sportswriter Connor (Alex Deroo), the real estate agent Joan (Krystal Hernandez), and the priest Michael (Chris Kandra) — play out their present lives and their childhood past in real time. All of it seems urgent, with sibling rivalries just as hot-button as whether to let their father die in front of them (they do), or who gets to care for the decidedly unsympathetic Dolly.

After the derailment of a host of potential conflicts, "Small Death" focuses on the relationship of Connor, the blunt talking journalist, and Dolly, who loved Connor's younger brother Liam, killed at age 4, better than him. When Connor and his wife, the sassy caterer Courtney (Emma Bernhardt), become the clear choice to give care to the slipping Dolly, that relationship gets raw, honest, hurtful and aggressive.

There can be quite a bit of humor in the various interactions, along with the mud-slinging. One spirited three-way scene, with the siblings arguing over everything, kept up a brilliant pace. Another cluttered scene when the family house gets marketed to Ronnie (Zack Georgian), returning to the neighborhood after years as a successful doctor with his showcase wife (the effervescent Misty, played to the hilt by Shannon Keelan), featured one laugh line after another.

The play also has enormous potential for poignancy. As usual, the actors are thoroughly rehearsed and spot-on character. But the basic strength of Cunningham's creation — this unruly, aggressively engaged family — is also its greatest weakness.

"Small Death" is in dire need of an editor. It has far too many scenes, too many characters — and too many themes that go unexplored. Physical abuse. "The Greatest Generation," and its aftermath. Even Dolly's loss of faculties veers between the central concern and a cipher. In the end, because of the multiple emotional pulls, there's too much unfulfilled tension.

The whole narrative of Dolly's long-dead parents and siblings takes up far too much stage-time. The suggested romantic link between Courtney and the prodigal neighborhood son Ronnie, as well as Ronnie's appeal as a "success" (as opposed to her own kids) in Dolly's eyes, really are just distractions.

As the play reaches its conclusion, with a granddaughter Lisa (Macey Jennings) and her beau Rowan (Chris Noran) about to stumble into the same choices that previous generations of Barrys have made, the power of the moment should have everyone thinking "No, no, not again." But the audience's relationship fatigue is too great, at that point, to invest much emotion.

"Small Death in a Big Country" plays through March 6 in the Callan Studio Theatre at Salem State College. For tickets and information visit www.salemstate.edu/arts or call 978-542-6365.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for Gatehouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow @PowersKeith; email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com

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Friday, March 4, 2016						
Friday Morning Play Dates at Maritime Gloucester						10:00 am
Maritime Gloucester						
Income Tax Advice						1:15 pm
Town Hall						

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