

Dissolute lives crumble in New Helvetia's 'Gingerbread Lady'

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Actress Jamie Jones' Evy Meara galvanizes any room she's in. A 46-year-old alcoholic cabaret singer, Evy is a has-been who never was.

Playing the central figure in Neil Simon's 1970 comic drama "The Gingerbread Lady," in a limited run at the New Helvetia Theatre, Jones leaves an indelible, compelling portrait of an often unappealing character.

The star of the original Broadway production, Maureen Stapleton, won major awards for her Evy (Simon wrote the larger-than-life part for her). However, the dark story was one of Simon's least successful, with the shortest run of his Broadway productions. (The playwright later turned the play into a brighter though still acerbic film starring his then-wife Marsha Mason.)

While full of smart and stinging humor, the story mainly chronicles the downward descent of its three adult characters, led by Evy's full-throttle swan dive toward personal oblivion. Only her 17-year-old daughter Polly (a terrific Joelle Jacoby), full of teenage naivete and beyond her years in philosophical optimism, offers any hope.

A cheery, drink-swilling, brutal-truth-telling, self-loathing force of nature, Jones as Evy draws people to her even as she pushes them away. Judging from the one album Evy made, and occasionally plays, she wasn't a half-bad singer. She might have had a modicum of success, the way a good-looking, not-terrible vocalist can, but she never got lucky that way.

Instead, Evy has worked little joints up and down the Jersey shore, gradually drinking herself out of work, out of a marriage and finally into rehab. The play opens with her returning home after drying out for 10 weeks as her best friends arrive at her dumpy Manhattan apartment for a modest welcome-home party. Though Evy may have briefly gotten sober, she hasn't gotten a life and her friends aren't any better.

The strong cast includes Matt K. Miller's anxious Jimmy, a struggling, out-of-work actor, and Shannon Mahoney's Toby, an aging former beauty queen. They're Evy's best friends; what they have in common is how little they have going on in their lives.

As the story progresses, they also realize how few prospects they have for changing direction. Jimmy has been replaced in the crummy play he was set to star in and Toby's passionless marriage has finally crumbled.

Though they gamely rally around Evy, her friends weigh her down more than lift her up.

Evy's dull, hunky, much-too-young ex-boyfriend (Ryan Snyder) also comes sniffing around, adding to her malaise. But the wild card is her daughter Polly, who comes to live with Mom. Evy's honest

enough to know she can barely take care of herself, much less someone else, but Polly refuses to leave, highlighting Evy's shortcomings. The bright Andrew Perez shines in his small role as a grocery delivery clerk.

Director Natasha Burr, a Sacramento newcomer, smartly orchestrates Simon's simple 1970 world, with Tracy Prybyla's lively costumes distinctively evoking the time. In a recent performance, the three-act play had an awkward set change before the third act, and the actors maintained their poise as a front-row audience member sauntered away and returned near the play's end.

The story doesn't resolve much for the characters, though the ending hints at redemption for Evy. With all that's passed before that seems unlikely, though Jones makes it impossible to take your eyes off of her.

THE GINGERBREAD LADY

Three stars

What: New Helvetia Theatre presents Neil Simon's 1970 comic drama, with Jamie Jones and Matt K. Miller.

When: 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday; 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday (last show).

Where: New Helvetia Theatre, 1028 R St., Sacramento

Tickets: \$20 and \$30

Information: (916) 469-9850 or www.newhelvetia.org

Time: Two hours and 15 minutes, including one intermission

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