

Theater

Family dysfunction smartly staged in *Mustang Sally*

BY AMY LYONS

Playwright Linda Felton Steinbaum tackles tough issues and comes out on top with her latest piece, *Mustang Sally*, now on stage at the Whitefire Theatre in Sherman Oaks.

The play centers around 31-year-old Kathy (Sally Conway) a music teacher engaged in a love affair with Sal, her 13-year-old student. At the outset, we quickly discover that Kathy has a child's mind and becomes particularly impish when in the presence of her business-savvy, no-nonsense sister, Elizabeth (Andrea Conte) and her overbearing, religious zealot mother, Marilyn (Tish Smiley).

sick child who can't live without Sal, and Elizabeth ramps up her control-freak core. Kathy thinks she has only one friend left, the likewise socially awkward art teacher, Tony (Sean Vincent Biggins), who shows compassion for Kathy's plight, but is hiding a deceitful truth from her.

This is family drama at its finest. Each character plays a believable role in the dysfunctional dynamic and the unavoidable explosions of emotion all ring true. The trio of female actors plays off each other well and seems to have a family history that pre-dates the play. Smiley is infuriating as a woman who is all about appearances and who relies on blind religious faith to raise her daughters.

It's no wonder her two daughters are such extreme types, one suffering from arrested development, the other suffering from fear of intimacy. Smiley prances and flits about the stage in a way that's both humorous and maddening, showing us what it looks like when a mother pretends to take care of her children, but doesn't listen or develop true compassion for them.

Conte does justice to the chilly, type-A portrayal of a daughter who's always been more of a mother and caretaker, even in her youth. Conway manages to elicit deep compassion for her character by showing us that the reason she's in love with a child is that she is a child.

In the end, the play becomes about justice and double standards. Is it somehow more acceptable for an adult woman to become sexually involved with a young boy than it is for a grown man to carry out an affair with an underage girl? No black and white answers are supplied, but society's acceptance of gender roles and sexual stereotypes are examined. What's also examined by this thoughtful script is how family dysfunction creates messes that are not easily fixed. ✱

Mustang Sally plays Fridays at 8 pm: Oct. 19, 26, Nov. 2, 9, 16; Saturdays at 8 pm: Oct. 13, 20, 27; Nov. 3, 10, 17; Sundays at 2:30 pm: Oct. 14, 21, 28; Nov. 4, 11, 18. For tickets, call (866) 811-4111 or visit www.theatermania.com.



Elizabeth (Andrea Conte) comforts her sister Kathy (Sally Conway) in *Mustang Sally*.

Elizabeth drops in on Kathy at home to find out why her shy, socially awkward sister has been relieved of her teaching position. When Kathy confesses to Elizabeth and Elizabeth's lawyer friend, Edward (Michael Blain-Rozgay), that she's in love with a student and plans to make a life with him, Elizabeth is initially enraged, but soon recognizes her disturbed sister's need for immediate help. Edward agrees to take the case, even though the commitment phobic Elizabeth won't make him more than just a friend.

While assuring Kathy that she'll make everything right, Elizabeth also has to deal with Marilyn, who thinks Jesus will save the day. While mom flirts with Edward, prays to the Lord and dumps her money into the latest internet scam, Kathy devolves into a love-

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