

## New Ground's "An Infinite Ache" Anything but Painful

Written by Jill Walsh  
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New Ground Theatre's current show, David Schulner's *An Infinite Ache*, appears to be a conventional love and marriage story. A man and woman meet, fall in love, and get hitched – nothing unusual. But the script is so intricately crafted that we see snapshots of the couple as they progress through a partnership of more than five decades and take on sex, marriage, children, and death – in a mere hour and fifteen minutes. The fast-paced, natural dialogue travels seamlessly through the years, with no specific scene divisions. Time simply progresses.

The whole play is set inside Charles' (and eventually Hope's) bedroom, most of the action happening around or on the bed. As time passes, the room endures as much change as the characters do, shifting from a drab bachelor's pad to a colorful shared space to Hope's plant-filled loneliness. There are no in-the-dark scene changes; rather, the action and dialogue keep moving while the actors arrange the room according to their stage in life. They decorate more lavishly as their incomes grow, they add photos of their children and each other to the walls, they tidy up as they converse.

Beginning with a tipsy Hope, played by Emily Burr, and an "eager" Charles (Tim Venable), the young couple discusses their first date, their backgrounds (Hope is part Chinese and Charles is Jewish) before Hope falls asleep on Charles' bed. We are then thrown into the flurry of early affection, sex, insecurities, arguments, and work-related problems. Then marriage creeps up. Their first child is born, a boy named Buddy. Hope adores the boy, but a tragedy occurs, leaving her emotionally estranged from her husband. They have a baby girl. After she leaves for college, Charles begins traveling often, to research for the science fiction novel/movie script he's writing. Hope has an affair while he's away. They separate, but then begin dating each other once a week. They grow old, and Hope dies. Then they return to that first night, with Hope asleep on the bed, Charles hovering over her like a watchful child, both innocent, young, and uncertain of the future.

The story is simple but beautiful. It takes a traditional male and female relationship and follows it through their shared life, highlighting both positive and negative moments. Most marriages endure some kind of tragedy, and every partnership grows and changes as experience affects it. Though Charles admits he fell in love with Hope when she fell asleep in his bed, Hope

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confesses there was never a specific instant she realized her love for Charles. Simple details such as these give the characters realistic dimension.

My favorite segment of the play was during the couple's mid-life. The set is dark, until Charles reaches over to switch on his bedside lamp and asks Hope, "Do you love me?" Another night, Hope turns her lamp on and talks to Charles. "Are you happy?" she wonders. "Define happiness," he replies. In this scene we get a perfect understanding of Hope's and Charles' relationship – each has worries, doubts, and surges of love, but they are often unanswered, unfulfilled.

This script would not have been successful without the integrity and natural talent of Emily Burr and Tim Venable. Burr is the spoiled, laid-back, fun-loving Hope, who seems at times uncomfortable with her high-strung husband. Venable as Charles, on the other hand, is energized and quirky throughout the whole show, and excessively professes his love and uncertainty about the relationship. The couple is absolutely believable together, with the passion with which they kiss, their comfort in proximity, the degree of anger and devastation they express, and the giddiness they share in their early years.

*An Infinite Ache* is an enjoyable, bittersweet show. We wish, for Hope's and Charles' sakes, that their magical first date could last forever – but life just keeps moving on.

*An Infinite Ache at New Ground Theatre will continue April 22, 23, and 24 at 7:30 p.m. and April 25 at 2 p.m. at Rivermont Collegiate. For tickets, call (563)326-7529.*