

Written by Thom White  
Monday, 09 September 2013 06:00

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There's a beautiful humanity in the QC Theatre Workshop's production of *How I Learned to Drive*, which presents playwright Paula Vogel's pedophilic tale with realistic characters rather than caricatures clearly defined as "good" and "evil."

That's not to say that Mike Schulz's Uncle Peck is forgivable for his predatory ways. But there's something refreshing about his character being more than just an über-creep, and that's what *Reader* employee Schulz (reprising his role after last year's Augustana College production of *Drive*

) and director Thomas Alan Taylor present: a family-member molester who isn't flatly bad, and is also even loving. While lust is clearly in Peck's head, Schulz's portrayal suggests that that lust occasionally moves from the forefront to the back of his mind, making room for his sincere desire to teach his teenage niece Li'l Bit to drive, and to care for her emotionally – even though those actions pave the way for potential sexual encounters. To be clear, Peck's actions are still unforgivable and repulsive. Schulz's portrayal, however, created a deeper emotional response for me while watching Friday's presentation, as I managed to also have pity and, to a degree, sympathy for this Peck.



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Opening in the late 1970s and presented by Jessica Denney's Li'l Bit as a look back at her life and relationship with her uncle by marriage – a tale told in flashbacks, with the girl seen between the ages of 11 and 18 – *Drive* parallels its leading character's driving lessons in Li'l Bit's growing understanding of sex, from the kitchen conversations with her mother and grandmother to her hands-on experience with Peck. Set designer Kenn Brinson places the action on a relatively stark traverse stage, with a car seat at one end and an oversized, 1960s-style radio at the other. In between these two objects, the floor is painted to look like a paved road complete with yellow center lines, while drive-in, motel, and pin-up-girl signs hang from the ceiling. This allows the emotion of the play, and the dynamic presentations of the actors, to take precedence over Vogel's setting, and the cast's characterizations prove worthy of the honor.

Denney, who begins telling Li'l Bit's story in her late 20s, is required to reverse her age as she takes us back through her youth, presenting us with a pouty 11-year-old, a self-conscious junior-high student, and a rather forward, independent high-schooler during various years. While Denney's depictions of the younger Li'l Bit tend to skew a little *too* young, her variance on every age she portrays is commendable, making clear the differences in her character's maturity and understanding of what's going on around her. Denney's Li'l Bit commands attention with her self-certainty and the energetic delivery of her incestuous tale, and creates interesting layers of "gray area" with her willing responses to some of Uncle Peck's advances.



Dressed in several wonderful period outfits by costume designer Emily Busha, and sporting a beehive-ish updo, Angela Rathman is one of the three members of *Drive's* Greek Chorus, portraying Li'l Bit's mother, her aunt (and Uncle Peck's wife), and a junior-high classmate. While her flat-chested student is presented with humorous brattiness, it's Rathman's progressively drunk mother – teaching her daughter the rules for women drinking alcohol – that stands out as her finest work, with her growing intoxication both amusing and believable. Greek Chorus member Chris Page's bartender is notable for his wordless looks filled with questioning judgment and condescension, as he begrudgingly responds to Uncle Peck's demands for more martinis for Li'l Bit (who has obviously had quite enough during their hotel-lounge rendezvous). And rounding out the Greek Chorus, Karen Jorgenson earns laughs for her grandmother character's sex advice – which serves as a warning to Li'l Bit not to have sex at all.

While Taylor highlights the humor in *How I Learned to Drive*, it's his focus on realism that makes the QC Theatre Workshop's production remarkable, and by presenting us with nuanced characters who are more than just sexual predators or victims – who have thoughts, feelings,

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and lives beyond their lusty ways – Taylor avoids preaching to his audience about what is right and wrong. What's wrong is *still* wrong, but the lines of innocence are blurred, with no person involved wholly hateful or pure, and this makes for an evening of entertainment that's welcomingly thought-provoking, rather than just aggressively moralizing.

How I Learned to Drive *runs at the QC Theatre Workshop (1730 Wilkes Avenue, Davenport) through September 21, and more information and tickets are available by calling (563)650-2396 or visiting [QCTheatreWorkshop.org](http://QCTheatreWorkshop.org).*