

Written by Thom White

Monday, 30 September 2013 06:00

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The Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse's *Things My Mother Taught Me*, which is about a young New York couple moving into a new apartment in Chicago, is one of those plays that requires patience, as the first half of the first act takes a while to get on its feet and bring in the humor. While Brad Hauskins' Polish building superintendent Max elicited hearty laughs during Friday's performance through the actor's adept comic delivery and (eventually overused) “

*Uh-oh*

”s, not much else, early on, was all that effectively funny. Until, that is, the parents of the cohabitating Olivia and Gabe arrived, at which point it was clear that director Warner Crocker's pacing for the rest of the show was going to be remarkable, and the comedic chaos amplified by the play's four parents fussing over their children.



There's much that's predictable in *Things My Mother Taught Me*, including the climax to its plot, and author Katherine DiSavino's dialogue tends to be over-explanatory, as if her audiences wouldn't be clever enough to get subtler jokes or emotional points (which would sharpen the comicality of the piece). This is especially clear in a lengthy – and gag-worthy – monologue in the second act detailing the “things my mother taught me,” which Lora Adams' seemingly prudish, overly organized Karen delivers to her daughter Olivia (Cara Chumbley). However, DiSavino does get enough right to make this an enjoyable, if disjointed, comedy. While Karen's “moral of the story” speech is delivered in all seriousness, Tom Walljasper's and Steven Einspahr's dads Wyatt and Carter are blessedly allowed to deliver their second-act, “father knows best” lesson to Olivia's fiancé Gabe (Daniel Crary) while three, or perhaps four, sheets to the wind, and armed with

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Reddi-wip. That scene is the most uproariously funny one in the play, buoyed by Walljasper's dependable jocularly and Einspahr's impressive and humorous physical choices between line deliveries, which themselves are wonderfully nuanced.

Rachelle Walljasper, however, is the first parent on-stage to truly delight, which she does during her Lydia's initial efforts to help son Gabe clean and move into his new place. While some of her lines are clearly condescending and judgmental, Walljasper delivers them with an air of innocence – one absent of any malice in her inflection – that instead renders her lines *subtly* condescending and judgmental, and more humorous for it. As Lydia fights with Olivia over giving the living space an overly thorough cleaning before moving a single box into it, and not using the toilet until the lid is changed, Walljasper's innocent act continues, and notably contrasts with Chumbley's attempts to keep Olivia's frustration in check, which are layered under a false smile and obvious efforts at patience. (Crary's Gabe, on the other hand, seems to have two emotional states: happy-go-lucky and extremely angry.)



Also of note in Circa '21's latest is scenic designer Susie Holgersson's apartment space. At first glance, the shoddy-looking kitchen area and hardly flawless paint job on the gray walls at the stage's rear give the impression that Holgersson's work isn't on a par with the theatre's typically inspired and well-constructed sets. It isn't until you realize that the play's setting is a relatively cheap Chicago apartment that Holgersson's talent becomes clear, considering that what looks less than perfect is actually perfectly dilapidated and second-rate by design. And Holgersson goes even further, adding interest to the scenery by painting three separate rooms – glimpsed through doors in the rear wall of the apartment – in shades of purple, pink, and green that scream poor taste.

The chemistry between the two sets of parents, however, is what really drives Circa '21's *Things My Mother Taught Me*

, allowing the humor to be more than groan-worthy, and the stress of having four parents interfering with a move truly palpable. In truth, they're all so amusing together, I could see a sitcom featuring the Walljaspers' Lydia and Wyatt and Lora Adams' and Steven Einspahr's Karen and Carter. And would.

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Things My Mother Taught Me *runs at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse (1828 Third Avenue, Rock Island) through November 2, and more information and tickets are available by calling (309)786-7733 extension 2 or visiting [Circa21.com](http://Circa21.com).*