

“Fragments” premieres at Rogue Theater Company by Amy Richard

There’s nothing like a rousing dysfunctional family drama to draw you in—Tracy Letts’ *August: Osage County* comes to mind. Amid the deep pain and strife, there’s surprising humor, as the characters struggle to escape the ever-growing, increasingly unbearable family dynamics.

Fragments, a new play written by **Jessica Sage** and directed by **Liisa Ivary**, explores the unraveling relationships among three generations of women from a Long Island Jewish family. There is considerable humor and poignancy in the women’s strained and combative interactions.

I sat down with Jessica, Liisa and **Eileen DeSandre**, who plays the matriarch of the family, exactly three weeks before the play’s opening on March 7.

All seems to be progressing well, according to the women. “The play is blocked,” Liisa said. “We have a framework and now we can take the scenes apart. I’m working now with lighting designer **Chris Sackett**, and it’s fun to be sussing this out.”

Fragments is the inaugural production of the **Rogue Theater Company** and will be staged at the Bellview Grange in Ashland. Jessica is both founder and artistic director of the new company.

“Functioning as AD, producer, and playwright is the most rewarding experience in my professional career,” Jessica said. “It’s extraordinary seeing my words on stage expressed and acted by these incredible actors. If I tell you I have a dream cast, that’s the truth.”

The play is semi-autobiographical and was workshopped in three rounds the last several years with OSF and Bay Area actors. Jessica had written the play some time ago, but it was read at Atelier at the Ashland Public Library last June, and the response was highly enthusiastic. A number of folks asked her to put it on stage.

“I considered which theater company I wanted to approach to produce *Fragments*,” Jessica recalled, “And I thought, who knows the play better than I? Plus, I’ve always wanted to launch my own theater company, featuring strong roles for women, and now seems like the perfect time.”

In thinking about who would direct her play, she went straight to Liisa, not only a good friend, but someone with whom she had worked.

“Two and a half years ago I asked Liisa to direct me and Peter Alzado in *Annapurna*,” she said. “I find her stunning as a director. She’s smart, able to see things broadly, can work one-on-one or in a group. And because this play is a very personal piece, there was no one I trusted

more to tell my story. Sometimes what I see on stage is very difficult for me to watch, and I absolutely made the right choice.”

“Liisa does old school directing,” Eileen said. “You can feel safe and the director has vision and provides permission. I call it ‘Ken Albers direction’ (Ken spent many years directing and acting at OSF)—the kind of direction where you feel guided and the director helps the actors discover the characters.”

This launches us into a conversation about Liisa’s directing style.

“As a director, my job is to be the audience and make sure that the story is clear and let the actors marinate and feel safe to do their best work. My favorite director and the one I try to emulate is Phil Killian. I worked with him three times, and he created such a safe room to make mistakes and no matter how bad you were, you really couldn’t be good unless you were bad.

“This ensemble is very strong, and I love letting them flail because they will find something stronger than what I could give them. It takes longer and it’s messier, but they will be better.”

The play is set in 1977, and as the press release states, examines the intricacies of sexuality, betrayal, and loss.

“It was a watershed time,” Liisa said. “I was about the same age at the time (as Rebecca, the character graduating from high school), and I didn’t realize what an extraordinary time it was to be a young woman and to have choices that my mother and her mother never had.”

In light of the themes, I ask about the humor.

“A lot of the humor comes from the family dynamic of how we act and interact with family members when no one else is watching,” Jessica explained. “So you get to see the neuroses intensify. There’s a lot of anxious behavior in the play, and Eileen’s character personifies these trickle-down-neuroses. So when she speaks it’s unabashedly honest and hilarious. The way Eileen interprets her role, she takes the humor to another level.”

I can easily imagine this, as I have seen Eileen’s humorous interpretations on stage.

Eileen explained further. “We’re telling a story with those themes, but you have to come to the play to hear the story, and the story is juicy fun. Everyone in the audience will have something or someone to relate to and recognize some behavior from their past.”

“The story is written from the perspective of an angry teenage girl,” Liisa said, “and she’s an unreliable narrator. Some things are mean and nasty in a very funny way...”

“...in a Jane Austen and Chekhov funny way,” Eileen added.

“Yes!” Liisa agreed. “The my-pain-is-funny-to-you way.” She paused and added, “It’s a very well-made play and a very unexpected journey.”

“The audience will definitely return for Act Two,” Eileen predicted.

I asked Jessica about her future plans for the theater, and though she won’t reveal her play choice for the next production in November until *Fragments* closes, she said that she is dedicated to putting female actors on stage and working with female directors and backstage crew.

“I’m committed to revealing all sides of women on stage,” Jessica said. “There is a dearth of strong female roles, and I’m specifically reading new works and some of my favorite plays written by women for women actors.

“I’m also trying to figure out my niche in Ashland. OSF has very big productions with high production values. I’m going for smaller, text-driven and character-based work. I won’t be doing musicals or farce or large cast productions. The *Fragments* cast of seven is big enough. I’m wanting to build a team of actors, directors, and people that enjoy working and collaborating together.”

She continues to explore whether or not she wants to be a nonprofit so that she can apply for grants. Ticket sales will help support the theater, but she also needs to solicit donations and sell advertising space to keep things afloat.

“We’ll see how it goes,” she said. “I know that if I put quality work on stage, everything else will fall into place.”

Liisa is thrilled that the cast spans generations and includes an OSF actor and teaching artist, SOU and AHS students, and others from the community. “We have such a variety of people and that’s what excites me about this theater.”

Fragments runs March 7, 8, 9, 15, 16 at 8 p.m.; Sundays March 10 and 17 at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$18 (\$15 for students and seniors). Preview tickets on March 7 are \$15. The Opening Night Fundraiser Champagne Reception on March 8 is \$25 and supports Planned Parenthood. Tickets for all events are available online at roguetheatercompany.com or at Paddington Station and the Music Coop in Ashland. For more information, call 541-205-9190 or visit the website.