

## Review: Pain fuels a culture clash in ACT's devastating 'Quality of Life'

By Pat Craig

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At first, Jane Anderson's "The Quality of Life" seems to be headed for a Red State/Blue State hoedown — one of those precious little comedies where we laugh at the Northern California liberals and the Midwestern conservatives and their silly little stereotypical ways.

We get a few giggles then go home still smug and safe in our own prejudices and not too late to watch "The Daily Show" or "The 700 Club."

Anderson's show, however, which opened Wednesday night at American Conservatory Theatre, has much more ambition and won't let you off that easily, as it plays out, mostly on the evocative ravaged hillside set by Donald Eastman.

Anderson, who beautifully directed her own piece, has made the faces quite familiar — NorCal liberals Neil (Dennis Boutsikaris) and Jeannette (Laurie Metcalf) live in a yurt in their burned out hillside and Dinah (JoBeth Williams) and Bill (Steven Culp) dwell in Ohio where she bottles pickles and preserves, and he has hewn a little garden out of the backyard wilderness.

Dinah and Jeanette are cousins who have grown apart through distance and philosophy, and they are brought together only by a world of hurt.

Bill and Dinah lost their daughter to a brutal murder. Joining a fundamentalist Christian church has kept them going, but it has also driven them apart. Neil and Jeannette were burned out of their hillside home by a wildfire, and now, Neil is dying of cancer.

It seemed to Dinah it was time for the two couples to get together, a nice gesture, but one destined to fail, which it does the first time Bill and Neil utter "Jesus Christ," each in a very different context. Except for basics like air and water, the two couples have little or nothing in common.

And it gets worse, when Neil takes a few hits of medical marijuana to ease his pain, and Bill asks if his hosts are interested in accepting Jesus.

Then Neil mentions that he's not going to let the cancer run its inevitable course but instead will kill himself on a predetermined date. The couple from Ohio just can't abide that and the religious talk gets more intense.

Bill goes for a walk and Jeanette and Dinah share a little of Neil's dope, leading Dinah to confess she and Bill aren't getting along too well, and that they don't see eye-to-eye theology-wise. In turn Jeanette confesses that when her husband takes his life, she's "going with him."

And that's when all hell/heck breaks out in both camps. It's also when Anderson's sparkling dialog and the wonderfully engaging characters and plot twists raise the stakes and move the play out into uncharted and thoroughly captivating areas.

We begin to see real and profound change in all four of these people, each of whom is engagingly familiar to us. The performances also add to the familiarity — Boutsikaris and Metcalf have captured every nuance of our pals to the left, but have taken their characterizations to a higher level by giving them specific character traits that turn them from generics to crystal-clear characters.

Culp and Metcalf have done the same thing, moving miles past the traditional Midwest mores to create genuine, believable characters — your blood pressure rises just watching how uncomfortable Bill is in his body, and Dinah's self-conscious mannerisms and laughter make her memorable.

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**# WHAT: "The Quality of Life, " by Jane Anderson**

**# WHERE: American Conservatory Theater, 415 Geary St., San Francisco**

**# WHEN: Tuesdays through Sundays through Nov. 23; call for show times**

**# RUNNING TIME:**

**# TICKETS: \$14-\$82, 415-749-2228 or [www.act-sf.org](http://www.act-sf.org)**