

## A radiant 'Quality of Life' makes regional premiere at ACT

By Karen D'Souza

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In "The Quality of Life," a wall of fire charges up a canyon to ravage a majestic Oakland hills home, laying waste to 30 years of memories, possessions and a beloved pet. Sadly, it's still not the most devastating thing happening in the lives of Neil and Jeannette. Not even close.

A pair of middle-age couples must face the forces of change ripping through their lives head on in Jane Anderson's haunting new play, which spins around the infamous 1991 Oakland firestorm. This beautifully pitched production, which debuted at the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles last year, summons a star-studded cast to tell the story of everyday people living through outrageous tragedies.

Sensitively directed by Anderson, it's also one of the most emotionally acute productions of the fall season. From its perfectly wrought details to its epic socioeconomic subtext, "The Quality of Life" is a brave-minded, big-hearted domestic parable that hits us right where we live. Hard. The radiant new work runs through Nov. 23 at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater.

Anderson, who also wrote the brutally moving "Food and Shelter," here etches a parable of red states vs. blue states that plays out in the lives of two distant cousins. Jeannette (Laurie Metcalf) a free-spirited bohemian who writes poetry, drinks organic wine and collects tribal masks with her anthropologist husband Neil (the redoubtable Dennis Boutsikaris) couldn't be less like her mousy cousin Dinah (JoBeth Williams), a churchgoing Midwestern woman who puts up preserves in the face of the brutally violent murder of her only child.

Certainly she can find no solace in her marriage. When she crumbles into sobs, her husband goes out to mow the lawn. All three actors were in the original production, and it feels as if they've let the characters steep into their bones.

Metcalf, best known in pop culture circles for her turns in "Desperate Housewives" and "Roseanne," delivers a harrowing performance as a woman with an unshakable lust for life matched in intensity only by her crippling fear of loss. When her beloved husband teeters on the verge of a nasty death, eaten away by cancer, she makes a choice that Dinah and her dogmatic religious husband Bill (Steven Culp) can't abide by. But whose life is it, anyway?

Anderson nails the laid-back elitism of the Bay Area vibe. Sitting by the yurt they now call their home, noshing on quinoa salad and tofu, Jeannette and Neil represent the ultimate in posh East Bay living: green, gourmet and gracious. But the playwright doesn't let us just bask in their fierce open-mindedness, quirky charm and intellectual élan.

She slyly pushes the audience out of its comfort zone as the play unfolds. She forces us to question where our loyalties lie when the chips are down. Her compassion for all the characters, even the ones that seem so foreign to the California zeitgeist, is what elevates the play.

Williams, known to many for her parts in "The Big Chill" and "Poltergeist," also uncovers layer upon layer in a role that might easily seem a bundle of forgettable dowdiness. Dinah's heart-wrenching pot-fueled revelation on the nature of God is a gem onto itself.

Little by little, the playwright pulls back from her close-up on that once-idyllic hillside. She shifts the bent of our gaze and makes us choose where we fit in the big picture of life, love and loss.

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"The Quality of Life"

Written and directed by Jane Anderson

The upshot: One of the most emotionally acute productions this fall, this is a brave-minded, big-hearted domestic parable that hits us right where we live.

**Where: American Conservatory Theater, 405 Geary St. at Mason, San Francisco**

**Through: Nov. 23**

**Running time: 2 hours, 5 minutes (one intermission)**

**Tickets: \$17-\$82**

**Details: (415) 749-2228 or [www.act-sf.org](http://www.act-sf.org)**