

'Quality of Life' lightens couples' burdens

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The Quality of Life: By Jane Anderson. Starring

JoBeth Williams, Laurie Metcalf, Steven Culp and Dennis

Boutsikaris. Tues.-Sun. through Nov. 23. American Conservatory Theater, 415 Geary St., San Francisco. \$14-\$82.

(415) 749-2228, www.act-sf.org.

In dance, it's called a "pas de quatre," the use of two couples in an interweaving skein of movement that becomes more than the sum of its parts. Onstage, Albee did just fine with the two-couple conceit in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," and Jane Anderson puts her own spin on it with her nicely made, beautifully acted comedy-drama "The Quality of Life," which opened at the American Conservatory Theater on Wednesday for a three-week run.

Jeannette and Dinah are cousins - distant cousins, actually, not only geographically, but spiritually as well. Dinah and her husband, Bill, who decide to visit Jeannette and Neil in the California mountains, are holding fast to their Christian beliefs as a way of dealing with the murder of their only child the year before. Neil and Jeannette have been burned out of their home during the 1995 Mount Vision fire and are living in a yurt. Although not religious, they, too, cling to beliefs as a way of dealing with tragedy: Neil is dying of cancer.

Neil and Jeannette have lost everything, but they almost believe that material things don't matter. In fact, they've hung the charred, melted remnants of their former life from a leafless tree that looms over their tent. Neil has not only chosen to stop chemotherapy and other conventional medical treatment in favor of frequent hits of marijuana to ease his pain, he's also decided to end his life in two weeks to avoid a prolonged, agonizing death. The revelation shocks Dinah, but it infuriates Bill, who tries to persuade him not only to abandon his plan but also to embrace Christianity to ensure his place in heaven. While Bill seems unwavering in his fundamentalist beliefs, Dinah is more tentative. She is trying very hard to find comfort in her religion, but the fact is, the wounds of loss are still very raw.

Despite the heavy subject matter, "Quality" is often very funny. Writer-director Anderson knows how to craft a good one-liner. She deftly uses comedy to relieve our tension once we realize we're going to be talking life, death and the whole damn thing. There are a few flaws in the play - a bit too many one-liners here and there, for one. Then there are the endings, plural. We want to know whether Neil and Jeannette will follow through with a plan that has horrified Bill, and whether Bill and Dinah will be able to work through problems that have come to the surface of their marriage after their daughter's death. Anderson gives us two near-endings and then the real thing.

No one is laughing when Jeannette and Neil play the final scene, but it skates too close to bathos to work well. In

fact, it reminded me of the scene in the film version of "Play It as It Lays" where Tony Perkins is dying after downing a lot of vodka and a lot of pills and Tuesday Weld is holding his head while reciting the kinds of vegetables she might have canned if only she'd had a normal life. Director Frank Perry and his screenwriters, Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne, infused that scene with mordant humor. Anderson means her scene just a bit too much, and it even throws the otherwise dazzling Laurie Metcalf, playing Jeannette.

Even with its few flaws, "Quality of Life" is a magnetic work of theater. And it benefits from four pretty astounding performances. Dennis Boutsikaris seems a bit too robust here and there for a man who's supposed to be dying, but his performance as Neil still conveys the cynical undercurrent beneath his strained philosophical surface. JoBeth Williams plays Dinah, dressed in khaki slacks, a pink top and matching pink sneakers. At first, she's so much the sweet little woman who breaks into tears whenever she thinks of her dead daughter. Bit by bit, she begins to reveal just how strong she really is. Steven Culp has the hardest job of the four, because Bill could be such a stereotype. Culp makes him human, although he stumbles a bit in the play's second near-ending. And even Metcalf can't pull off the play's final scene.

Lydia Tranji's costumes contribute beautifully to our understanding of the couples' relationships, with Neil and Jeannette often dressed in red, auburns and ochers, while Bill and Dinah go for suburban predictability. Donald Eastman's yurt is the visual center of attention, of course, but he's dotted the stage landscape with scarred trees, inevitably and all too properly suggesting the dead landscapes of a Beckett play.

Beyond the structural use of two couples, Anderson shares Albee's skill at choreographing dialogue. Both as writer and director, Anderson creates an aural sense of movement throughout the play that not only underscores its themes but also manipulates our focus from character to character, couple to couple. It may seem counterintuitive to say that a play about religion, loss and assisted suicide is actually "fun" much of the way, but that's not only what "Quality of Life" is, but also how Anderson is able to get her audience to consider its complex themes so willingly.

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