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3 women question life in Albee play

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When the oldest of the title roles in Edward Albee's "Three Tall Women" totters offstage for one of her frequent trips to the bathroom, her 20-something legal assistant makes a crack about diapers - which prompts a scolding from the old woman's caretaker.

"Haven't you figured it out yet?" the caretaker says. "You take the breath in . . . You let it out. The first one you take in, you're upside-down and they slap you into it. The last one, well, the last one you let it all out, and that's it. You start and then you stop."

What happens in between - life, in other words - is the subject of what will likely be one of the year's most thoughtful plays on the Des Moines stage. Theater . . . For a Change's skillful production of Albee's 1994 Pulitzer Prize-winner delves into deep questions about love, loss, hope and regret.

In the first act, Sue Gerver breathes life into the role of the stubborn, bigoted, bossy - and somehow endearing - old loon known simply as A. She shakes with emotions that ricochet between stormy rants and tearful bouts of self-pity. When she's not scolding her caretaker, B (Mary Bricker), and legal assistant C (Laura Van Waardhuizen), she regales them with stories from her life in high society. Her face lights up when she recalls the early years of her marriage or her days riding horses.

"Oh, I used to love it," she recalls with a distant gaze. "Riding in the morning, going to the stable in the station wagon in my coat and jodhpurs and my derby, and petting - what was her name? the Dalmatian - Suzie, I think."

But A remembers pain, too: a drunken sister, a hostile mother, a runaway son and a cheating husband who died after an ugly battle with cancer. When she suffers a stroke at the end of the first act, it's almost a relief.

In the second act, B and C transform into younger versions of A. Through a theatrical trick with a mannequin, the three characters circle the old woman's comatose body, discussing their common life from different points of view. The result is something of a cubist portrait, with each character painting a different fragment of the women's life.

Bricker, as the frank and motherly 52-year-old B, contends middle age is the best part of life. "What I like most about being where I am is that there's a lot I don't have to go through anymore," she says. "It opens up whole vistas - of decline, of obsolescence, peculiarity, but really interesting!"

The last word, though, belongs to Gerver's A. After 91 years - or 92, she's not sure - she's convinced that the best part of life is "when it's all done, when we can stop."

That's also the best part of the play itself - when it's all done and there's time to mull over everything it has to say.

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Details

WHAT: "Three Tall Women," presented by Theater . . . For a Change

WHEN: 7:30 Thursday through Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday

WHERE: Grand View College's Viking Theatre, 2811 E. 14th St., Des Moines

TICKETS: \$10

INFO: (888) 288-9512,
theaterforachange.com

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