

Marjorie Prime: The Public Theater Brings Dystopian Artificial Intelligence to Lewiston

Luis David Molina Rueda

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I almost missed this show, and I wish I had seen it earlier to tell other folks to go watch it. But no such luck! Getting my tickets a couple of hours before and going to watch on the closing weekend, I showed up at The Public Theater in Lewiston again. This time, I went to watch Marjorie Prime. Right before Gala, out of all nights I could have gone. Am I a mess? I guess that is irrelevant. Warning, this review contains plot spoilers!

I wanted to start this review by saying the show was executed professionally as everything I have seen at The Public so far, raised some really intriguing questions, and had a distinctly Black Mirror vibe. That is the same as to say that you missed out. But do not panic! Doing some research about the show, I found out there is this super indie Sundance film about it that came out in 2017. The screenplay is adapted from the original Pulitzer finalist theater script by Jordan Harrison. Harrison (fun-fact time) writes for Orange is the New Black and is one of those cool dudes that gets a bunch of art fellowships. Versatility in navigating different media when writing is a thing, my friend.

Pleasantries aside, the play takes us on a journey to the age of artificial intelligence to 2062. Marjorie, comically played by Broadway actress Diana Findlay, talks to a holographic version of her deceased husband Walter (Jackson Thompson), who is programmed to satisfy Marjorie's companionship needs. This, though kind of Black Mirror-y and cool on a screen, is pretty creepy to watch on a stage. The story unwinds to present Marjorie's daughter Tess (Mhari Sandoval) and her husband Jon (Russell Berrigan). Tess hates having her mom talk to a holographic version of her dad, but funnily enough, once her mother passes away, she does the same. As Tess talks to the holographic version of her mom, she grows frustrated. On a trip to Madagascar with her husband, Tess also passes away, and now Jon gets a Tess Prime. By the end of the play, we have all the Primes (Walter, Marjorie and Tess) talking to each other and reminiscing about the lives of the memories of the real Walter, Marjorie, and Tess. Three, technically, man-made, human-looking creatures talk to each other about the lives they haven't lived, but the lives of those whom they "represent." Thank you, Mr. Harrison!

How do I go about this? Quite frankly, I thank Christopher Schario's directorial choices for making it less of a creepy piece and turning the play into a comically pleasing experience. From beginning to end, as you learn the Primes to be futuristic non-human elements who need to be filled up with information to serve their owners, laughter comes about. The sharp acting of the Primes conveys the non-human idea through un-natural speech and awkward stares into the audience. Heavy on blue, white, green, and pink lighting design, the futuristic feeling is properly accomplished, while keeping it grounded enough in our time. Set and costume design did not fall short. Simplistically balanced to articulate the connection between our time and what we could expect from 2062, the house where the whole piece is run sells well, and the costumes worn by the characters look very grounded in our time, as to connect future and present.

Dystopian writing and entertainment are on the rise — cool and scary. You might have missed the theatrical fun this production entailed, but the film is out there. Check it out!