

## Transcending *How I Learned to Drive*

JUDY FORT BRENNEMAN

The first time I saw Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, I left the theatre disappointed, a little frustrated and vaguely irritated. Where was the powerful story that "got it," the story that leading local psychiatrist Chris Hageseth said was excellent but extremely risky for any incest survivor to view? The play could trigger flashbacks or re-open old wounds, he explained to the reporter from the town newspaper. The play was emotionally intense and emotionally accurate. Women who had experienced sexual abuse in childhood might have to leave the theatre in mid-performance if they weren't forewarned, far enough along in their own healing, or sufficiently self-aware. I think he even recommended that mental healthcare specialists be standing by in case of severe adverse reactions.

I'd already had plenty of therapy and besides, I've never been the shrinking violet victim type, so I decided to go. Honestly, I think I was hoping for something intensely wrenching, something that would resonate with my own experience. I'd been writing about incest for several years by then, creative nonfiction, memoir and essays mostly, and although my work had seen some success and audiences responded well at readings, none of it seemed to connect the way Vogel's play was said to connect with her audiences.

I didn't have the experience years ago to analyze an actor's performance, to consider how the portrayal of a character could vary significantly depending on the player. I had even less awareness of the director's impact.

To me, a story was a story; readers (and by extension, audience members) might draw different meanings from the story, but the story itself didn't change. And if the meanings and interpretations by the readers

were radically different from each other and from the author's intent, then the author probably hadn't done a good job to begin with. That a director or acting company could emphasize some elements over others, inadvertently or deliberately shifting the core meaning of the story, had never occurred to me.

Although I've seen enough performances of other plays since then to develop an awareness of how different interpretations of a given work can manifest as significantly different stories on stage, nowhere has that experience been so profound as with the recent performance of *How I Learned to Drive* at the Curious Theatre Company in Denver, Colorado, presented in honor of the company's tenth season anniversary and using almost all of the cast members from its original award-winning 1999 production.

I didn't see the play at Curious Theatre in 1999, but I suspect that the 2007 production is every bit its equal. The 2007 production also presents an interpretation of the work that is superior to the one I attended about the same time as Curious Theatre's 1999 show, produced by another young independent theatre company.

The basic story of *How I Learned to Drive* is of a young girl who is sexually molested by her uncle beginning when she is eleven years old. The story begins when she's grown and works its way backwards through time, using driving lessons as a metaphor and unifying device.

There are at least two ways to interpret the story of L'il Bit: she can be viewed as a trampy, seductive girl who is almost equally (if not fully equally or entirely) at fault for the sexual relationship that develops between her and her uncle; or, she can be viewed as a normal, every-day girl trapped and victimized by family and circumstance. In either interpretation, she must find her way to adulthood.

The performance I saw years ago slanted strongly toward the former interpretation. This blame-the-victim view is simply wrong—not just morally wrong (which a generous reviewer might excuse in the name of art), but factually wrong. In the context of the play, such an interpretation seems to imply that incest and other forms of sexual abuse are not so bad. Richard Hoffman (author of *Half the House*, a memoir of sexual abuse that resulted in the conviction of Hoffman's childhood baseball coach) in his essay/review "What's Love Got to Do With It?" questions whether the play might actually encourage abuse and makes a good case that it could. Writers who explore the ambivalent feelings children experience (for example, Martin Moran in *The Tricky Part*) and researchers (Judith Lewis Herman, author of *Father-Daughter Incest*, and others) point out that the complexity of the family relationship never leads to the conclusion

that the child has seduced the adult or is in any way responsible for the adult's bad behavior.

After sitting through a performance that not only didn't "get it" but got it almost entirely wrong, despite news reports of the time that implied the play was partially autobiographical, I concluded that at best, Vogel's experience was significantly different from mine, and at worst, she was clueless and guilty of writing a bad play. The decision-making process of the Pulitzer committee has always been a mystery to me; the only reason I could see for awarding the prize to Vogel for this play was because of its subject matter. Staging a play about incest in contemporary society, with fewer stereotypes than such stories usually carried (though it is still set in rural southern culture), without the protective veil of antiquity and myth (e.g., Oedipus), and not intended for titillation or raw shock was new, at least to theatre. The play was also a product of its time, following on the heels of several excellent memoirs, celebrity disclosures, and a general increase in public awareness about the prevalence of abuse. It was becoming more acceptable to discuss incest and other forms of sexual abuse in public, much the same way awareness and discussions about physical abuse had broken through to the public consciousness ten years earlier.

The 2007 Curious Theatre production did more than reveal the play the way the Pulitzer committee must have seen it. This performance improves on Vogel's script without changing a line.

The performers imbue their characters with an uncommon depth and dimension. The flirtatiousness and rebelliousness of C. Kelly Leo's L'il Bit are solidly placed within the context of normal adolescent development. Family relationships and interpersonal dynamics coil and tangle around her like a braid of snakes and barbed wire, with tiny patches of love or hope or concern tucked in, nearly invisible.

This makes for a much more believable story. It rings true, or truer, as story, and it resonates more closely with my own experience of incest and its aftermath. There is no "wink-wink nod-nod" in the Curious Theatre production; there is no suggestion that L'il Bit brings any of this on herself. There is a sense of inevitability, that the family structure is set up like a sluice or funnel with no way for L'il Bit to escape even if she knew she would have to (or was allowed to or entitled to). This is often how the family system looks in retrospect, especially to those outside the family, and is appropriate, considering the structure of the play.

Uncle Peck, played by Marcus Waterman (new to this casting), effectively portrayed one of the most chilling traits of a predator and one often overlooked: the ability to manipulate without being obvious. Vogel

describes this character as one that should be played by an actor who “might be cast in the role of Atticus in *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” which seems usually to be interpreted to mean a *sympathetic* character. The appropriate element of this requirement is that Peck should not be a two-dimensional bogeyman; he must be a fully developed character both to be believable and to be the horrific person he is. That is, because everything nice or kind that he does is directly tied to his ultimate purpose of accosting L’il Bit, we see him as all the more evil, because of the contrast as well as the duplicity.

The play as performed by Curious Theatre Company revolves tightly around L’il Bit and Uncle Peck, with the three-person “Greek Chorus” filling in the details that enrich the story. These characters, played by Melanie Owen Padilla, Denise Perry-Olson, and Michael Morgan, are rich and full, too. Perry-Olson in particular did a stunning and hilarious job as the Mother explaining proper social drinking. Her blend of verbal delivery and physical comedy portrayed in short order an entire story in itself, without succumbing to cardboard cutout drunkard conventions.

The timing of the performers and crew was superb. One fine example is when L’il Bit has been pestering her mother to let her go with Uncle Peck to the beach, and her mother (Female Greek Chorus played by Perry-Olson) finally relents, saying, “But I’m warning you—if anything happens, I hold you responsible.” At the precise instant Mother says “if anything,” the stage lighting reveals the Teen Greek Chorus as Grandmother (Padilla) standing upstage of and slightly offset from Mother, and Mother and Grandmother say the line “if anything happens, I hold you responsible” in unison. The result is both a realization of the multigenerational message and a recognition of the potential impact of a phrase that parents say without thinking to their children every day.

The effect is chilling—almost as chilling as the closing scene—when we see Uncle Peck forever “reflected” in L’il Bit’s rear view mirror. This lighting effect is powerful and, if certain weaknesses in the script are ignored, does a good job of illustrating the long-term impact of incest.

In examining why the Curious Theatre production felt more truthful—accurate, emotionally engaging, realistic—compared to the earlier performance, I believe the difference flows from directorial choices and a better understanding by the actors of their characters, not from other production elements.

For example, the earlier staging used two straight-backed chairs to represent the car (as suggested by Vogel in her script) and a small table with chairs for family scenes. The stage was relatively bare; there were probably a few traffic signs posted, but I don’t remember much else

about the scenery or props. Lighting, as I remember it, wasn't a big part of the production.

In the Curious Theatre Company set, the front half of a car dominated the stage; a large sign against the upstage wall proclaimed "Starlight Drive In" in brightly lit letters; a porch swing down left, a card table and chairs just right of center, and risers anchored other scene locales. As we filed into our seats, wisps of mist drifted across the stage and a few minutes before the play began, the amount of mist increased as the song, "Darling, Stand By Me" began. Lighting established and emphasized mood, focused attention, and reinforced the action.

This more elaborate staging probably had an effect on audience expectations and may have made us more amenable to believing the story, but it would not have solved the problems of the earlier production. Costuming doesn't account for it either; in both companies, the costumes were appropriate for the characters, effective and supportive, not distracting.

The strength of Chip Walton's direction and the power and empathy of the actors are almost—but not quite—enough to overcome three significant weaknesses in the script.

In "Idling in the Neutral Gear," the scene where "Peck teaches Cousin Bobby How to Fish," the implication is that Peck is setting Bobby up for abuse. This scene, while emotionally powerful, is unrealistic; most predators are consistent in their sexual orientation. Peck clearly has a known history of molesting girls, and it is unlikely that he would pursue boys the same way. More importantly, the scene exists for the sole purpose of establishing what might have happened to Peck when he was a boy, leading to the second weakness.

The second weakness is revealed in "Shifting Forward from Third to Fourth Gear," as L'il Bit segues from finally telling Uncle Peck "no" to stating the facts of his death, when she asks, "Who did it to you, Uncle Peck? How old were you? Were you eleven?"

Underlying these questions (no matter how heartfelt the delivery) is the assumption that the reason Peck is a sexual predator is because he himself was sexually abused as a child. Whether this is an assumption or a false hope, it is not and has never been supported by research or crime statistics. It is one of the lies we tell ourselves as a reason—an excuse—for Peck's behavior, so that we can dodge our own responsibility in failing to protect our children. "It's not his fault because the poor man was abused" is blame-shifting of the worst sort. If Peck's behavior is not Peck's responsibility, then our failure to protect his victims isn't our fault, either. The blame goes to that nameless, faceless someone further up the

line, who must also be blameless since, according to this belief, the only reason someone becomes an abuser is because they were abused. There's nothing to be done, and the predator is never really at fault.

For the victim of a sexual predator, this is a nasty double-bind. The victim can't blame the perpetrator, because after all, it really isn't the perpetrator's fault. Who then is responsible for the victim's injuries? And what power can the victim have in defending and reclaiming herself? The victim is and continues to be powerless; there is nothing for her to fight against or to triumph over. There is no acknowledgement that she has survived something truly evil. And there is a demand that the victim feel empathy for and, worse, forgive the perpetrator (because, after all, it wasn't his fault that he did what he did). The victim even becomes guilty of further "damage" to the perpetrator, as in this scene, which implies that Peck's "drinking himself to death" is L'il Bit's fault, caused by her refusal to see him again.

How much stronger a story this would be if we do not, if we cannot, know why Peck is a predator. He is still fully human, horribly flawed, but now the responsibility for his action is where it belongs: with Peck, not shuffled off to some blame-shifted anonymity. In this context, L'il Bit's survival and eventual triumph become far more profound—which leads to the third weakness.

In this same scene, Peck tries to convince L'il Bit that they can finally have sexual intercourse. L'il Bit finds in herself the ability to say no, and she says it firmly and permanently.

This is the moment of truth, of power—and Vogel wastes it, because she is so intent on excusing Peck and insisting that L'il Bit must forgive Peck and forgive herself in order to "move on" in her life. This is another false assumption; it is not necessary nor required for one who has been a victim of a sexual predator to forgive that predator in order to survive or transcend the crime. And I have never met an incest survivor who would ever wish, even metaphorically, for what L'il Bit wishes for Uncle Peck at the end of this scene. No woman among us would ever sacrifice another young girl to her predator in hopes that it would "release him." We know better.

The Curious Theatre production manages to rescue the play from itself in the final scene, when the voices of L'il Bit's past coalesce around her as she gets ready to drive. As she adjusts her rear view mirror, Uncle Peck's face appears in the middle of the back seat, like a grinning ghost. In Vogel's script notes, she says that L'il Bit "smiles at him, and he nods at her. They are happy to be going for a long drive together. L'il Bit slips the car into first gear" and says to the audience, "And then—I floor it."

The way Leo and Waterman play this, the two are not happy to be going for a long drive together. Waterman's expression is more ghoulish than charming; Li'l Bit is more determined than happy. She realizes that part of surviving is knowing that you're stuck with your past: she's stuck with Peck; he's always going to be in the car with her, no matter what. Nothing, not therapy, forgiveness, or driving as fast as the wheels will take her will ever change that. In this final moment, there are hints of despair, and of strength, awareness, and acceptance—and these are the emotions of survivors.

### Resources

- Herman, Judith Lewis, with Lisa Hirschman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Hoffman, Richard, "What's Love Got to Do With It?" *FlashPoint*, <http://www.flashpointmag.com/hoffman.htm>
- Hoffman, Richard, *Half the House: A Memoir*, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995; and New River Press, 2005.
- Moran, Martin, *The Tricky Part: One Boy's Fall from Trespass into Grace*, Beacon Press, 2005.