

SECRETS of a Soccer Mom

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Secrets of a Soccer Mom - Media Reviews

Atlanta Theatre Buzz:

INTO THE NET

01/23/2009

Grade: A

About halfway through Act II of Kathleen Clark's marvelous *Secrets of a Soccer Mom*, one of the moms asks with honest confusion "How can people we love so much make us feel so trapped?" This sense of the frustrating ambivalences of motherhood is the driving force behind the success of this piece, and raises it from a simple domestic comedy into a sublimely funny and moving work about the loves and frustrations that bind us into a net from which we probably don't want to escape.

Taking place in "real time," the play is a snapshot into the lives of three suburban moms at a Mother-Son Soccer game. Nancy (Tess Malis Kincaid) is an ex-model, struggling to keep perspective in a life in which kids shouting "Mom" every few minutes prevent any coherent thought from taking root. Lynn (Rebekah Baty Hammer) is an über-volunteer, the woman who takes on the PTA, Den Mother, Field Trip parent roles that define and fulfill her life. Alison (Chinai Hardy) is the competitive one, struggling through a marriage in which passion is a distant memory and fantasy is a hollow substitute. Throughout one two-hour afternoon, they bond, confess, kvetch, plot, reminisce, and let the behavior of their always-in-view children take priority over everything else. And, somehow, at the same time, they glimpse that ever-elusive perspective that helps them see their lives as less a trap and more an adventure.

As she showed in *Southern Comforts*, playwright Kathleen Clark is very adept at creating real characters that surprise and deepen in spite of the seemingly clichéd nature a cursory description (such as the one I give above) would indicate. Her dialogue is realistic, often hysterically funny, moving without being cloying, and carrying the rhythms of real conversation and real people. I could not imagine any of these lines in the mouths of any character other than the one talking. And, as she showed in *Southern Comforts*, she creates conflicts and situations that are seemingly small, but which the characters tend to elevate to crisis status. That they are so overblown is nevertheless no excuse for ignoring them, or for us underestimating their importance. We are left at the end with no sense of real resolution, but with a sense that these women can find a resolution. Eventually.

I hesitate to comment on the production itself, since I saw a preview performance, and afterwards overheard director Heidi Cline discussing tweaks and adjustments with her technical crew. The fact remains, though, that even in this early "version," all three actresses hit each note perfectly, and the play flows with an invigorating pace. The set is a bit stylized, with a soccer goal net surrounding the action like a fisherman's net, the paraphernalia of childhood (and parenthood) sticking through like such much bait. It's a conceit that doesn't overpower with its obvious symbolism, and I could find no quibbles with the light and sound that I saw. Still, I'll be going back a little later in run, and may make some adjustments to my comments at that time.

If I make this sound like a depressing and serious screed about motherhood and the "trap" of having children, I apologize. Equal weight is given to the joys of being a mother and wife, to the little moments that are the real "bait" in the parenthood trap. And, overriding all is a sense of affection for these characters, as well as an acknowledgement that motherhood can be very different for different women.

There is a sequence during which Nancy discusses two such different women her life, both of whom died young. One was obsessed with parenthood and couldn't understand mothers who were too busy to watch their children play. The other was obsessed with personhood, with making sure there was enough effort made to "not losing yourself" in the day-to-day minutiae that makes up raising kids. Nancy's reminiscence of these two women strike at the heart of the conflict she faces, right at the heart of the seemingly paradoxical drives and pressures that mothers have always faced. Can there ever be enough "Mommy Time" when every minute is filled with "Mommy Help Me Time?"

This ambivalence is, for me, the strength of this play. It acknowledges that motherhood, that parenthood has no simple solutions, no "Instruction Manual." At the same time, it acknowledges that losing yourself in your kids can have unpleasant consequences.

And, this play gives us three actresses playing three women who make us laugh, who make us nod our heads in recognition, who take us through a roller-coaster ride of emotional over-excess and under-acceptance.

It is a play about being trapped in a net from which the only escape is an embrace of that net. And it's a celebration of the joy of finding all the other parents in that same net with you.

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