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‘The Call’: waiting, fretting, hoping

Profile Theatre opens its season of plays by onetime Portlander Tanya Barfield with a drama about adoption and Africa and the uncertainties of life

February 8, 2016 // [THEATER](#) // [Bob Hicks](#)

When the call finally arrives, it's not as if Annie's jumping up and down for joy. She's been waiting and waiting, and stressing, and having double-triple-quadruple thoughts, and ... well, as the Gershwin boys put it, let's call the whole thing off.

Or not. That's the problem. Life is full of maybes, and at some point you've got to have a solid yes or no. But how do you get there?

The Call, the first play in Profile Theatre's new [Tanya Barfield](#) season, opened Saturday night at the Artists Rep complex, and suggests a season of playful, contemporary, issue-oriented, and curiosity-driven theater to come. It's part domestic drama, part cultural-conflict theater, part situation comedy, part mystery thriller, and always smart and engaging. And it introduces Portland audiences to one of the city's own: Barfield grew up here before moving to New York, and went through school at the Metropolitan Learning Center, and has been a Pulitzer nominee, but has never before had one of her plays produced here. Suddenly, an entire season is about to rectify that oversight.



Howard and Soden: the talk before *The Call*. Photo: David Kinder

In *The Call*, Annie is a woman of a certain age, an artist who's more or less put off her career because it conflicts with her job at a museum, and who has also put off having a child until, it seems, it's biologically too late. So she and her husband, Peter, have decided to adopt, and they have a line on a baby about to be born in Arizona, but the young mother seems likely to keep the kid, and so Annie, almost on impulse, decides they should adopt from Africa: so much poverty and sickness, so many orphans, so many needy kids.

Annie and Peter, by the way, are white. Their best friends, the lesbian couple Rebecca and Drea, are black, and just back from their own trip to Africa, where Peter has also traveled and come home with a deep secret, and they're pretty much down with the idea, with a few reservations: Rebecca will do the little girl's African hair, she insists, because Annie won't know how. Meanwhile, Alemu, Annie and Peter's new neighbor from Africa, keeps dropping off boxes of supplies for them to take to the continent when they go to pick up their new child. And Annie waits, and frets, and fusses.

Director Gemma Whalen drives the action briskly and energetically, giving the show a forward thrust that focuses a sometimes sprawling script. The show opens on a giddy note, at a dinner party where Rebecca and Drea are recounting their adventures in Africa (there's a story about a tourist who jumps off the bus to get a close-up look at those cute lions) and Annie can barely contain herself, she's so eager to break the news of the impending adoption. The scene's so giddy that it rushes over itself, losing some vital dialogue in the process. But things soon settle down to a quick but crisp clip, and the drama begins to set in. The swiftness is good, because as appealing as *The Call* is, it sometimes also feels a little overstuffed, especially in the buried subplot about Peter and Rebecca's brother, which feels like another play just itching to burst out.

In the key role of Annie, Amanda Soden once again delivers a clear, strong performance, and I mean "strong" in a true sense: she has a dominating presence, and uses it well to suggest Annie's fierce spirit, her stubbornness, her indomitability that, unbending, risks breaking. Annie is gracious and smart and funny and unrelenting, which makes things tough when she begins to doubt herself, and makes the audience wonder how she'll adapt to the realities of parenting. Tom Walton is a terrific foil as Peter: low-key, reserved, apparently conciliatory and yielding but with his own hard core. (Another local note: Kelly AuCoin, who began acting in Portland and has gone on to a successful national career onstage and in television, starred as Peter in the play's 2013 New York production.) Anya Pearson as Rebecca and Chantal DeGroat as the sharp-witted, comically waspish Drea play off each other nicely, and Jasper Howard brings a good sense of the outsider's earnest awkwardness to Alemu, the man without a country.

It is either an oversight or an extremely conscious choice by the playwright that the concept of Africa stays vague and generic. Not once does anyone mention which country Drea and Rebecca visited, or where Peter had his disastrous encounter, or what country Alemu comes from, or where Peter and Annie's new baby is supposed to be coming from. It's all just "Africa." The play's most memorable line comes from Alemu, at the end of a frustrating conversation with Annie. "You want a child from Africa," he says, "but you do not want Africa." That sentence illuminates all sorts of layers of misunderstanding between the United States and the people of Africa, both politically and personally. But Alemu says it more sorrowfully than accusingly: you haven't really thought this thing through, have you?

In the end, it's difficult not to wish everyone well, because whatever their flaws (and there are plenty) everyone means well, which in these days of fiercely fractious cultural and political divisions seems humane and civilized and a blessed relief. This isn't a matter of imperialist meddling or institutional racism so much as a conflict of private, personal dimensions: How will I love? What will be the right thing to do? Life is messy. Sometimes you say yes, sometimes you say no. But it's still a maybe sort of thing.

*

Profile's production of *The Call* continues February 21 on the Morrison Stage at Artists Rep; [ticket and schedule information are here](#). Coming later in the Barfield season: [Blue Door](#), March 7-24; [Fall Festival: Antigone Project](#) (Barfield is one of five contemporary playwrights with short pieces), September 7-11; [Bright Half Life](#), October 27-November 13.

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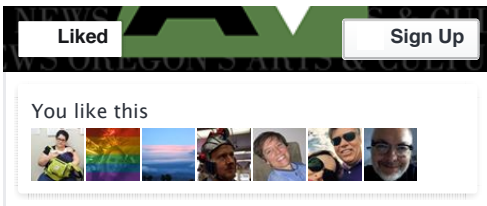
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