

Tanya Barfield's 'The Call' explores themes of friendship, adoption and looming Africa



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When we want something so badly, when we hunger after it, judgment can desert us in a hurry. In Profile Theatre's first show of the season, "The Call," a white couple yearning for a child decide to adopt a baby from Africa, but discover it is not an easy process. In fact, it becomes an emotional roller-coaster ride that leaves them reeling.

Playwright Tanya Barfield, a Pulitzer Prize nominee and Portland native whose work will be featured this year at Profile, spreads before us sublime storytelling in this piece about decision-making when the truth is unclear. Annie and Peter (Amanda Soden and Tom Walton) are an amiable ordinary couple who haven't been able to conceive. Their best friends are Drea and Rebecca (Chantal DeGroat and Anya Pearson), a gay African American couple who offer support and perspective, but get caught in a crossfire of marital explosions. As in the best plays, humor blends into a serious theme, and DeGroat's witty, wide-eyed Drea supplies this liberally as part of the quartet. They're a family made up of friendship that springs from a deep place.

Highlights: There are several: the stunning ending, which we won't reveal, Annie's meeting with a mysterious African neighbor (Jasper Howard) in the park; and a dark, clouded history that Rebecca and Peter share from his Peace Corps days. Also, in a light-hearted scene, Drea and Rebecca get excited at the thought of helping Annie get creative with the African hair of her adopted child.

Most valuable performer: Everyone is valuable. Soden is a shining central character, whose passion for a baby is palpable. Walton has fine moments as a would-be father in anguish. As Rebecca, Anya Pearson proves a faithful best friend to Annie, and DeGroat's lovely, funny Drea offers comic relief. But it is the lanky, grinning Howard as the African neighbor Alemu who enchanted me. As he relates an African folk tale to Annie about a witch, he becomes that sorcerer. He's the outsider, full of warmth yet mystery, adding a frame of reference and pathos to a difficult decision.

Line of the night: "You want a child from Africa, but you do not want Africa."

Biggest surprise: The ending, which some of us truly did not expect. It's also the best moment.

Take-away: A story of friendship, hope, despair and revelation, "The Call" refers to that life-changing phone call from the adoption agency. A country ravaged by childhood deaths, and death in general, Africa becomes a looming force, an unseen sixth character

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