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by Gary Black

Review: The gut-punching truth of Theatre UAF's 'Stop Kiss'

"Stop Kiss," the fall mainstage production by Theatre UAF directed by professor Carrie Baker, opens with a snippet of the 1977 classic "Best of My Love" with the lyrics, "Doesn't take much to make me happy, And make me smile with glee. Never, never will I feel discouraged, 'Cause our love's no mystery."

As upbeat and fun as the song is, it's a portent for the fate that befalls Callie and Sara — two women who unexpectedly fall in love and suffer at the hands of another for it. While sharing their first kiss in a New York City park, Sara is attacked, with the beating leaving her in a coma. It's a stark reminder that the play, which is set in the 1990s, still has real-world implications in 2015. Baker has taken playwright Diana Son's tale of self-discovery and turned it into a reminder that we as a society have a long way to go toward finding the best of our love. It's a performance she's crafted well, with few flaws.

Katrina Kuharich as Callie and Sierra Trinchet as Sara shine as the leads, and it's refreshing to see the two actors in a piece other than a heavily-stylized period production. Both are graduating seniors and neither are strangers to the Fairbanks stage. The production is Kuharich's fifth at UAF, and it's great to see her excel in a lead role, one that allows her to show off her slightly silly side. Kuharich's previous supporting roles in "The Ash Girl," "An Inspector Calls" and "Tartuffe" saw her cast as pretentious, snotty characters. Here, she's handed a role that is a breath of fresh, fun air, and she handles it well.

Trinchet, who has numerous Fairbanks Shakespeare Theatre productions under her belt, also beams as the somewhat stodgy Sara who learns to loosen up a bit thanks to Callie's influence. Trinchet, like Kuharich, can hold her own as Desdemona or in the Agatha Christie classic "The Mousetrap." In "Stop Kiss," she gets the chance to go current, and it's a delight to watch.

The onstage chemistry between Kuharich and Trinchet works in a Felix and Oscar sort of way, one in which when you leave the theater you can envision Callie and Sara being one couple comprised of two opposites. Kuharich and Trinchet are at their best with their banter, the type of banter you exchange with your

best friend, someone with whom you feel truly comfortable.

Rounding out the cast are outstanding supporting roles by the understated Corey DiRutigliano as George, Callie's on-again, off-again hookup. "Stop Kiss" is DiRutigliano's second stage performance — the first being Fairbanks Light Opera Theatre's "Rent" — and he emerges as a sly scene stealer. Also watch for Cynthia Jones, whose role as Mrs. Winsley is pivotal in a comforting, head-nodding way. Nate Cole as Detective Cole, the officer charged with investigating the crime, and Mallory Smyth as Peter, Sara's former boyfriend, round out the cast and prove the most sluggishly monotone of the ensemble.

The story is told in a nonlinear format, meaning it jumps around chronologically. This might sound like a distraction but it's far from it. It's actually a mechanism that works and is utilized well here to move the story along. Lighting and scenic designer Kade Mendelowitz makes it clear that you, the audience, are in a different time and space with his resourceful use of lighting, and with the addition of a few props, you know you've transitioned from Callie's apartment to a police interrogation room or hospital suite.

Opening weekend saw a post-performance panel discussion, in which members of the university community and Fairbanks residents engaged in a dialogue about issues the play raises. Baker, the director, has never shied away from tackling heavy social topics in her productions, and this a value for Interior Alaska. One of the primary goals of any higher education establishment is to challenge thinking and foster new ideas. Baker has done that well here with "Stop Kiss." More Fairbanks residents should take advantage of Baker's productions.

"Stop Kiss" runs at 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday in the Lee H. Salisbury Theatre in the fine arts complex at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Tickets are available at the box office before showtime or online at www.uaf.edu/theatrefilm. The production should be considered rated "R" for language and implied violence.

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Callie (Katrina Kuharich, left) sits by Sara (Sierra Trinchet) while the nurse (Cynthia Jones) watches over in Theatre UAF's "Stop Kiss."

Kade Mendelowitz, Theatre UAF Photo