

Unless

By Carol Shields and Sara Cassidy

Reviewer Jane Penistan

A parent's worst nightmare is to lose a child. *Unless*, by Carol Shields, examines all the aspects of a grown child abandoning her family and friends and going to live on a bleak and sinister street corner in friendless Toronto. The domino effect this has on all the members of the family is that this child is effectually lost to all of them.

Norah (Celine Stubel) is discovered wearing a placard "Goodness" and sitting on the sidewalk of a busy intersection in the city. She refuses to have any contact with her parents, siblings, or friends.

Inevitably, now begins the maternal self-examination. How had she failed to bring up her daughter as a happy, well adjusted and moral young woman? Where did the parents fail? What will the younger sisters do when they leave school? Will they too abandon promising university education for no apparent cause? Does being a professional working writer prevent Reta from fulfilling her role as a mother? Has she neglected the children? These are questions with which all parents torture themselves when something goes wrong in the family. Always there is the appalling weight of guilt.

Seriously concerned is Reta's husband, Norah's father Tom, a busy general practitioner (Allan Morgan). In the small town where they live, there is gossip and speculation about the family. Tom also goes to see Norah when he is in Toronto. He diagnoses her alienation as post traumatic stress. It is Tom who discovers that Norah has suddenly vanished from her accustomed corner. Anxiously he calls the hospitals and finds Norah alive but suffering from pneumonia and in grave condition.

The family gather at the bedside and discover deep burn scars on her hands and arms. Here they learn of the trauma that has precipitated her separation from all the people who love her: yes, post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Nicola Cavendish, as Reta, courageous and forthright, is the central character in this introspective drama, holding together all the other characters round her, suffering their criticism, bewilderment, and pain with them.

Other members of the cast play multiple roles very successfully. The sisters, the children's grandmother, the morning coffee club ladies, and the various male friends and the brash publisher, all add complexity and interest to this insightful play.

Roy Surette directs the action with skill, vision, and intelligence. The problem in this production is the huge amount of ever changing projection on the backdrop. It is distracting rather than enhancing. On the other hand, the small cameos on the high upstage backdrop are amusing and relevant.

All the characters in this comedy are well drawn, and the dialogue is amusing and humorous, lightening the unhappy and traumatic events. This well-written work provides much food for thought. - reviewvancouver.org

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