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by Carter DeJong For the News-Miner

'Tiny Beautiful Things' is a 75-minute trauma dump in the best way

Whatever your plans are this weekend, cancel them — unless it involves attending one of Theatre UAF's performances of "Tiny Beautiful Things."

Based on the real life story of author Cheryl Strayed's book of the same name and adapted for the stage by Nia Vardalos, the play tells the story of Sugar, a writer who takes an unpaid job as an advice columnist. The production is directed by Rachel Blackwell.

In the play, Sugar quickly realizes that the type of issues her letter-writers are concerned about go far beyond typical relationship troubles.

Sugar struggles at first to connect with her readers. But she knows what any half-decent writer already does: The most compelling stories are those that show the raw, personal emotion of real life people, including herself.

For Sugar — played by University of Alaska Fairbanks senior Hannah Greene — that rawness is her own.

The play is certainly for adults. Sexual abuse by a family member, heroin addiction and a parent's loss of a child are just a few of the mature topics featured in the play.

Greene runs with these topics without losing her stride. Her delivery is simultaneously humorous and powerfully emotional even when she's talking about something as depraved as being sexually assaulted by one's own grandfather. Greene's performance was even more impressive considering she spent the entire 75 minutes on stage with no intermission.

"Tiny Beautiful Things" features

only four actors, but that's really all you need for a story like this that focuses on the quality of dialogue above anything else. Each of the three letter writers also give enviable performances, especially David Valentine, who plays Letter Writer #1. His deadpan delivery fits perfectly with the overall feel of the story.

The intimacy of the Lee H. Salisbury Lab Theatre (located behind the larger Salisbury Theatre) combined with set design reminiscent of a late 1990s to early aughts apartment makes for a wonderful experience. Even the laptop Sugar uses to write her letters is about 4 inches thick.

Really, "Tiny Beautiful Things" is about love. More specifically, that love is anecdotal. There are no rules of engagement when it comes to love;

no guidebook, no empirical way of approaching it.

All we really have is a world full of people trying to achieve whatever their personal definition of love is. Sugar's blunt, comical and truly valuable advice is, frankly, the closest we have come as a species to understanding love.

"Tiny Beautiful Things" continues this weekend with performances at 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday. Tickets are free for UAF students with a Polar Express Card, \$20 for seniors and military, and \$25 for adults — no child discount. As wonderful as the play is, it is not kid-friendly as it contains mature subject matter.

To purchase tickets, visit uaf.edu/theaterfilm.



Hannah Greene is Sugar, and David Valentine is Letter Writer #1 in Theatre UAF's "Tiny Beautiful Things."

Photo courtesy Theatre UAF