

Collected Stories



How far can a writer go in using another person's life experience for his own work? In *Collected Stories*, Playwright and Pulitzer Prize winner Donald Margulies' looks at the very heart of a relationship between a well known author and her young talented protege who is just embarking on her own career. When the play opens, an awestruck college student Lisa Morrison, arrives at the New York apartment of her instructor, author Ruth Steiner, for a tutorial. The friendship that will develop over a period of six years will end in a conflagration of emotions when Ruth is shocked to learn that Lisa has

taken a story she once told her in confidence and used it in her first book. "Some things you don't touch," she tells Lisa.

Donald Margulies, a Yale professor, based his 1998 play on an actual incident between two authors that he found in a newspaper. The story, which percolated in his head for some time, was later transposed to his own play, *Collected Stories*, with some significant changes. It's no wonder that both characters in the play can argue so effectively about artistic integrity. The beauty of *Collected Stories* is that beyond an all too familiar plot about an author who sees her pupil become a star while her career is winding down is that both Lisa and Ruth make perfect sense in their interpretation of how far an author can go in pushing the boundaries. Margulies makes it all the more interesting by making his them both sincere, intelligent people who despite a long term friendship, haven't really understood each other at all.

You can't dislike Lisa. Played by **Erin Mackinnon**, she's every inch the eager, unprepossessing, self-deprecating student kneeling before her idol, until she becomes aware of her own considerable talent and discovers the knack of manipulation. She arrives at Ruth Steiner's apartment as a badly dressed gushing college coed, effusive in her compliments to Ruth, her teacher, her Great One, the famous author of an award-winning book of collected stories who makes a living teaching creative writing at Columbia University. Hardly able to string words together in a complete sentence when she speaks, Lisa has impressed Ruth with the short story she has written and is able to talk her into taking her on as her assistant.

That's not an easy feat. **Cayle Chernin's** Ruth Steiner is a disarmingly acerbic, brutally honest and brittle Jewish New Yorker who can squash someone with a few choice words. Nuance isn't her style, nor is she anyone's fool. Settled in her ways and fiercely protective of her privacy, Ruth seems as contained as the Manhattan phone book, living alone for the last 30 years in her organized clutter of an apartment, serviceably designed by **Akiva Roser-Segal** for the tiny stage of the Tarragon Theatre's Extra Space.

Little by little Chernin lets Ruth's unerring trust in her pupil soften the edges. Up to now, it's been a master/pupil relationship with Ruth educating Lisa on the art of writing. "We're all rummagers - all writers are, picking through the garbage," but when Lisa has her first short story published in a literary journal, Ruth is hurt she wasn't told. As apt pupil slowly becomes disengaged from her mentor's approval, Ruth bears up nobly, until trying hard to look at Lisa's success with equanimity. "I'm jealous because you have all your life ahead of you. It's about time, time, that's what it's about."

There is nothing even tempered when Lisa's first book comes out with the thinly disguised story about Ruth's early romance with an renowned middle-aged poet. "You sculpt like a thief," says the outraged Ruth. "Who asked you for a revisionism of my life?" But the pupil has learned well,

taught by a master. It's a delicious irony from Margulies, whose keen observations on artistic license is well founded. He teaches playwriting at Yale University.

Presented by Mea Culpa productions, **Collected Stories** is a solid production directed by **Sasha Wentges** with two fine performances by Erin Mackinnon and Cayle Chernin and some great melancholy jazz added to the atmosphere by saxophonist Daniel Jamieson. Though the final scene of the play seems more of a oddly tempered shouting match than is necessary with Chernin demonstrating Ruth's rancor and bitterness more than her humiliation and pain at seeing her life being turned into "pulp fiction," it is after all Ruth's tough survival instinct that has been compromised as much as her trust in Lisa. **Collected Stories** ends on the right note, even if resignation is a bitter pill to swallow. **Collected Stories plays at the Tarragon Theatre Extra Space from May 23 to June 2. 30 Bridgman Ave. 416-531-1827.**
(Reviewed by Jeniva Berger)