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Ethel is Norman's defender, the always-smiling, pleasant face on the marriage that gets far less credit than she deserves. In many ways, she's a typical film/theatre wife, ever-tolerant and loving with freshly-brewed coffee at the ready. But Learned goes so far beyond that.

The audience doesn't know what to think when she finally lets something out, slapping her hands upon the table and taking a before-unheard tone in order to stand up to Chelsea's profane and emotional rebuke of Norman as a parent. Once again, we're shown just enough.

On Golden Pond - Theatre Review

Ethel has an unconditional devotion to her husband, one that is strengthened each and every day she fears for his health. She may appear on the surface as eternally optimistic, but it's just as much of a mask as Norman's jokes. She refuses to dwell on her fears, but she won't pretend they don't exist either. That duality is a tall order for any actor but one Learned displays so perfectly as Norman collapses breathlessly to the floor near the end of the play.

With her portrayal, Learned essentially becomes the emotional center of the play, the embodiment of what we're supposed to take from the narrative.

To Wonderful Result



Photo by Rob Levine

The trick about that "message" is it's not simple. Sometimes everything doesn't get fixed exactly like we'd like it. Sometimes the past is our affirmative foundation; other times it haunts us. And while time inevitably brings conclusions, it also brings beginnings when we least expect them.

In truth, there is little *not* done well here. The staging is efficient and active without ever becoming distracting, and the supporting actors each grasp their character idiosyncrasies so perfectly, finding the depth just beyond the facade.

You hear Craig Bockhorn's wonderfully high-pitched giggle as Charlie the mailman but also see the longing he's hiding as he steps forward to Chelsea's apparent disclosure that she has no longer has a boyfriend. And Kate Levy crosses her arms and leans on one leg as Chelsea, tilting her head in great false confidence to mask her desperate distance from the man she calls "Norman" rather than "Daddy."

In one fantastic moment, Norman stands on the porch, wet from fishing in the rain. Chelsea is just on the other side of the screen door, and the gap between them seems monumental, so much more than the scant few feet. She wants to repair something that has been broken for a long time, but she has so much standing in her way.

Just like the rest of the play, we're given just enough. It's not going to be a daytime soap moment, and that makes each word spoken that much more effective. When we think things won't be resolved, we're given just enough. "I love you too," Norman says slowly to his daughter on the phone at the end of the play.

On Golden Pond will make you laugh more than any zany musical, and it will warm your heart more than any romantic comedy. Most of all, it will make you ponder your own mortality as well as the importance of each quickly escaping day. Now that's great theatre.

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