
ENTERTAINMENT

Boulder troupe's 'How I Learned to Drive' a powerful look at child abuse

By Adam Goldstein for [DAILY CAMERA](#)

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If you go

What: square product theatre's "How I Learned to Drive"

When: 8 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 5, through Saturday, Nov. 7

Where: The Dairy Center for the Arts, 2590 Walnut St., in Boulder (Production also runs at [Buntport Theatre Company, 717 Lipan St., Denver, Nov. 12-14](#))

Tickets: \$15-\$22

Info: 303-444-7328, [thedairy.org](#) or [squareproducttheatre.org](#)

Parents' guide: Contains strong adult material.

The scars left by childhood trauma aren't easy or neat; abuse can leave deep damage that defies simple explanations and straightforward remedies.

It's fitting, then, that playwright Paula Vogel offers no facile explanations in "How I Learned To Drive," her Pulitzer Prize-winning drama that explores a particularly heinous case of sexual abuse against a young child. Vogel offers a multifaceted, heartbreaking exploration of a crime that spans several years and leaves enduring wounds. She defies standard concepts of chronology, narration and staging to present a stunning and subtle portrait of psychological damage.

The Boulder-based square product theatre company does justice to the playwright's narrative vision in their stark and striking production of Vogel's 1997 drama. Opting for little in the way of onstage frills and effects, the company instead focuses on the layers and depth that rightfully earned the show the Pulitzer Prize. Director Liza Williams and a cast of only five bring Vogel's difficult story to admirable life through earnestness and pathos.

The story centers on the childhood, adolescence and teenage years of Li'l Bit (played by Emily K. Harrison), a girl growing up in 1960s rural Maryland. The course of Li'l Bit's progress from a defiant 11-year-old to a damaged 18-year-old navigating the stresses and demands of her freshman year in college has everything to do with her family.

Her grandparents (Kevin Lowry and Maggy Stacy) are old-fashioned relics of another era — her grandmother is an unfailingly devout Christian who proudly recounts stories about how she was claimed as a child bride by her grandfather, a man who

has no qualms about poking fun at Li'l Bit's physical development and sexual progress. There's Aunt Mary (Haley Johnson), a woman who wears repression and denial like a cloak, and there's Li'l Bit's mother (also played by Johnson), a single mother abandoned by Li'l Bit's father who is relying on help from her dysfunctional family. Li'l Bit also has a cousin, Bobby, who appears as only a satellite character.

Indeed, the only other personage in the drama fully fleshed out by the playwright is Uncle Peck ([Mark Collins, a former Camera theater critic](#)), Aunt Mary's husband and Li'l Bit's lone confidant during the most difficult developmental years. As the other members of her family tease her about her bust size and her interactions with boys, Uncle Peck is patient and sympathetic. As her mother warns her about her own bad experiences with men and tries to impose some structure, Uncle Peck gives her driving lessons and takes her on trips. As her peers at school taunt her for her physical development, Uncle Peck is a source of encouragement.

He's also a constant source of abuse. Vogel skips back and forth between formative years in Li'l Bit's adolescent and teenage years, revealing that Uncle Peck starts sexually abusing his niece when she's 11. The first driving lessons are concurrent with the first cases of abuse. He gives her alcohol. He takes pictures of her in his basement. As she nears the age of 18, he hints at formally breaking ties with her aunt.

The square product theatre's take on Vogel's complex and cringe-worthy story is unsettling and heartrending, thanks in large part to the strength of the lead actors. Harrison is constantly striking as Li'l Bit, seamlessly shifting between different moments in the course of a crime that goes on for years and years. As Vogel places Li'l Bit's asides at different points through her life, Harrison takes up the cues with ease, alternately acting as a shy 11-year-old, a confused and conflicted teen and an adult searching for answers and healing. Harrison wears all these hats with no transitions or exits; she flips between roles as narrator, protagonist and observer with eloquence and ease.

Harrison's take on Li'l Bit is tied closely to Collins' portrayal of Uncle Peck, a character as difficult as they come. Collins' success at fusing villainy with charm and sympathy is unnerving; his Uncle Peck is at once kind and nefarious, earnest and evil. His delivery of a scene featuring a nonexistent cousin Bobby is a disturbing highlight of the show.

As the supporting cast, labeled simply as Female Greek Chorus, Male Greek Chorus and Teenage Greek Chorus, Johnson, Lowry and Stacy take up multiple roles, few of which offer any real depth or roots. That's the point here, however: Vogel writes Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck as the only fully formed characters to fully highlight the conflict and the crime. Still, each of the actors delivers competent takes on a revolving cast of characters, some of whom come off as being just as complicit in the abuse as Uncle Peck.

All told, Williams and the cast don't need expensive sets or detailed prop to convey the heart of Vogel's script. Along with some stunning lighting work by designers Jess Buttery and Sydney Arenas, the actors rely on the power of the text and their own skill to bring to life the uncomfortable, messy and heartbreaking core of the story.