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Leaving Iowa

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Taproot Theatre's "Leaving Iowa" is frankly one of the best shows I've seen this year. If you a) are from Iowa, b) are from the Midwest, c) are from anywhere at all and have left home to move somewhere else, d) have ever taken a road trip from somewhere to anywhere else or e) have a family of any sort, you are required to go see this show!

By the way, in case you still aren't sure, that means you.

Written by Tim Clue and Spike Manton, and directed by Karen Lund, "Leaving Iowa" opens on a set that consists of a backdrop painted to mimic a typical road sign in bold colors, stating "The People of Iowa Welcome YOU," and a stage laid out like a field of green farmland.

Cleverly designed by Mark Lund, the simple backdrop opens up to allow two bench seats to emerge forming the interior of a car, while supporting characters appear and disappear through a variety of windows and doors cut into the backdrop.

Don Browning (Ian Lindsay), a writer in Boston, has come back home to Winterset, Iowa ("Home of the Duke!") to see his mother and sister and to scatter his father's ashes. While driving around the state searching for the perfect place to leave his father (Dad played by Robert Gallaher), Don's memories of family road trips with Dad, Mom (Kim Morris) and Sis (Helen Harvester) are triggered and relived.

The resulting adventures, both past and present, are both hilariously funny and deeply moving. As my sweetie said during intermission, "We've all been in that car."

Dad is a history teacher with an undying fascination for historical minutiae, and as Don says, "Fascinating' was the family vacation F-word." During the endless hours of driving to tiny forgotten towns, he quizzes the kids, "Oh now there's an Alaska license plate! All right, kids, when did we purchase Alaska?"

The show left all of us in the audience animatedly discussing our own memories of family road trips, and crying for the fragility of these everyday moments from everyday lives caught in the amber of our own memories.



Ian Lindsay, Robert Gallaher, Helen Harvester and Kim Morris in "Leaving Iowa" (Source: Erik Stuhaug)

Ian Lindsay and Helen Harvester, as Don Browning and Sis, do a remarkable job shuttling between their adult and childhood selves. In the back seat of the car, they recreate very much what I remember with my own brother, at times playing cat's cradle quietly together, at other times tormenting one another almost beyond endurance, and at other times joining forces, as when they wear Dad down into visiting the tourist trap Ghost Caverns, which advertises giant bats and witches.

Meanwhile, Mom sits up front lotioning her hands, handing out Rice Krispie treats and acting as intermediary between Dad and the kids. Blazoned into Don's memory is "The Honking Incident," when Mom, for the first time in front of the kids, gets angry with Dad for honking at an RV.

Scattered through past and present are the wild variety of characters created by Ryan Childers as Man and Jenny Cross as Woman. Woman could be Grandmother with her plate of Krispie treats always at the ready, or a gruff and boyish mechanic who pulls out her terrible John Wayne impression when she finds out where Don is from, or the staggering drunk who locks herself out of her motel room when she goes to get ice.

Man appears as the irrepressible uncle suffering with gout, Don's childhood friend who couldn't wait to leave Iowa but now teaches there while complaining mightily about the stupidity of his students, and a grocery bag boy chasing down a rogue cart while explaining that "there's a slope, just to there where you're standing. That's the low point!"

Whoever they become, every time they appear on stage they are a complete delight. As is the show itself all the way around, complete with all the nuanced complexity of family dynamics over time, filled with love and regret.

The show left all of us in the audience animatedly discussing our own memories of family road trips during intermission. And it left me crying for the fragility of these everyday moments from everyday lives caught in the amber of our own memories.

I knew I'd be calling my own parents this weekend just to touch base, and I felt incredibly grateful that I still can call them, even if, as in the play, my conversation with my father is not much more than stilted silences and an in depth discussion of the weather.

"Leaving Iowa" runs through June 16 at Taproot Theatre, 204 N. 85th St in Seattle. For info or tickets, call 206-781-9707 begin_of_the_skype_highlighting FREE 206-781-9707 end_of_the_skype_highlighting or visit online at taproottheatre.org