

ACTORFEST
NEW YORK
2000

IT'S WHAT YOU KNOW

Show Guide

STOP KISS -- Ashland (Through Oct. 29)

Reviewed by Rob Kendt

Diana Son's 1998 play *Stop Kiss* comes off as a disarmingly gentle, modest, affecting romance. The key is disarmingly. Even the terrible, violent climax of the love story between Callie and Sara, two New Yorkers who connect over a period of weeks and awaken feelings they dare not name, is diffused by an overlapping flashback structure which alternates in portraying their tentative mutual courtship and tracing their slow, fraught recovery in the wake of a hate crime.

Oregon Shakespeare Festival at the Black Swan, 15 S. Pioneer Dr., Ashland. Repertory schedule. July 4-Oct. 29. \$19-43. (541) 482-4331.

The disarming out of the way, what Son does in the play's brisk but never glib intermissionless 100 minutes is to lay land mines along the well-worn paths of genre-the genre in this case being the coming-out-first-love gay romance-and then let them lie. Most don't go off till after we've left the theatre. And Loretta Greco's new production for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival fully realizes both the play's knockabout urban charms and its searching undercurrents, and even improves on its haunting indirection with a beguilingly non-naturalistic scenic design by Robert Brill and sharp, un sentimental choices that give the characters' rue and doubt their due.

The conversational rhythms are a little forced at first between Callie (Tyler Layton), a hardened New Yorker who seems to relish the city's noise and chaos because they drown out the inner voices that would question her life's path, and Sara (Julie Oda), a sunny Midwesterner, who, with her stubborn optimism about her new teaching job at a Bronx public school, is one of those archetypal new arrivals who come to the city to change their lives, even if they don't know what forms the change may take. But as the characters' comfort with each other increases and it dawns on them that it's more than friendship they're feeling, Layton and Oda relax into their parts, and the show takes us by the hand.

This is especially impressive, since while the actresses are warming to each other, they're also playing out the parallel story of an investigation into what happened when Callie and Sara finally gave in and kissed each other in the wee hours in a West Village park. The burden for this balancing act is mostly on Layton, who alternates movingly between emerging and submerging until the play's beatific ending clinch. The sneaking power of Son's play is here, in Callie's painful self-sorting, to which the playwright never lends the obligatory self-revelatory speech or tidied-up denouement. Instead, amid the misunderstandings and uncertainties that follow the gay-bashing of two women who haven't named themselves as such, Son shows us two women embracing, probably for the first time, the private risks and responsibilities of love.

Helping immeasurably with the play's quick-change narrative structure is a crack supporting ensemble-Kevin Kenerly as a booty-calling friend of Callie's who's touchingly blindsided by her self-discovery, Andrea Frye as a skeptical but well-meaning neighbor, Tyrone Wilson as an insinuating pit bull of a cop, and Charlie Kimball as an old boyfriend, a hectoring voice from Sara's past-and Brill's red-and-white Romper Room set, which is able to suggest under James Vermeulen's lighting everything from quirky op-art apartment decor to the clinical confines of interrogation rooms and hospitals. Alex Jaeger's costumes are on the money, especially for the fickle Callie, and Jeremy J. Lee's urban sound design is appropriately both playful and menacing.

With this neatly subversive play, so well understood here by Greco and her actors, Son manages quietly to insist-in a theatrical climate still thick with essentialist identity politics-that while a kiss may never be just a kiss, it is still a kiss, after all.

© 2000 [Back Stage](#) and [BPI Communications Inc.](#) All rights reserved.
BPI Electronic Media includes [Billboard](#), [Adweek](#), [Amusement Business](#), [The Hollywood Reporter](#), [MC](#), [Mediaweek](#), [BPIQ](#), [PDN](#), [Editor & Publisher](#), [The Bookseller](#), and [Film Journal](#). Sites hosted by [Telescan Inc.](#)
Read our [LEGAL NOTICE & PRIVACY POLICY](#)