

SEVEN DAYS [04.28.10]

Father Time

Theater review: *A Song for My Father*

By Elisabeth Crean

Many of us eventually face caring for elderly parents, and it can be a mixed blessing: On the one hand is an adult child's gratitude for the long life of Mom or Dad; on the other, a cascade of often devastating medical and financial problems. The realities of aging rarely reflect the serene image of the "golden sunset" years.



Tara Lee Downs, John D. Alexander and Robert Nuner

Wolcott poet and playwright David Budbill's new play, *A Song for My Father*, examines how a son and his increasingly infirm dad wrestle with these challenges. The author's own experiences with his father, who died in 1999 at age 93, provided the initial inspiration for the moving story. The world-premiere production at Montpelier's Lost Nation Theater showcases terrific work from a harmonious quartet of Vermont actors. The highlight is Robert Nuner's stellar performance as Frank, the father who is a seething Eyjafjallajökull of emotion.

Budbill is best known for *Judevine* (1984), which brilliantly brings to life the residents of a fictional, hardscrabble town in northern Vermont. *A Song for My Father* concentrates on illuminating one complex character: Frank Wolf, who shares many biographical details with Budbill's dad. Both were born in Cleveland in 1905, left school in seventh grade to work and eventually drove streetcars for a living. Like the younger Budbill, fictional son Randy Wolf earns advanced degrees and moves to Vermont to become — yep — a writer.

Randy, played by John D. Alexander, narrates the two-hour tale as a loose series of memories, which relive important family scenes. The flashbacks focus on the rocky father-son relationship, but also include key women in Frank's life. All the characters serve as foils that reveal aspects of Frank's personality.

Frank vacillates between pride in Randy and resentment that his son had it "way too easy." Papa Wolf recounts terrible sagas of his abusive, alcoholic father so regularly that his son can recite them verbatim. Act I explores the volatile family backstory; Act II traces the extended decline of Frank's health. As Dad duels with the indignities of dementia, physical decay and confinement to a nursing home, Randy travels to visit him. Frank's feisty caretaker, Nurse Betty, becomes a source of support for both men. But everyone is ultimately helpless to change the inevitable outcome.

As Frank, Nuner creates a magnificent portrait of a deeply conflicted man. Randy describes his father as "proud of the way he'd pulled himself up, yet ... all that pride, hard work and self-esteem floated on a sea of rage." Nuner captures the tug-of-war between Frank's exterior bravado and his inner anxiety. When the father badgers, baits and lectures his son, the cigar smoker's gruff voice matches his brusque, confrontational manner. But an unhealthy nervous energy pulses beneath the confident demeanor. He fidgets worriedly, tapping a foot and rubbing his hands together; his eyes dart and wander.

Nuner also brings out the script's surprising humor and warmth. Even bedridden, Frank flirts audaciously with his nurse. Tara Lee Downs makes Betty a gem: spirited and sexy, even dressed in dumpy scrubs. She

demonstrates Betty's compassion by treating the old man gently, without condescension, and maintaining patience even when libido or dementia draw his behavior way over the line.

Comic relief also comes from Frank's daffy second spouse, Ivy, who, Randy notes, "looks *exactly* like Mother." It's a wonderful laugh line, because the same actress plays both roles. Ruth Wallman skillfully draws the sharp contrast. She portrays Ivy as an aging airhead, with a grating Southern accent and credulous religiosity. Ivy believes that God steers her car through a bad storm. Literally.

By contrast, as Frank's first wife (and Randy's mom), Ruth, Wallman radiates maternal wisdom and goodness. Since the play takes place in the fluid space of Randy's imagination, Ruth hangs around for much of the first act — despite being long dead — to observe, comment and even join in the action. Wallman and Alexander show the relaxed, loving connection between mother and son. It's the opposite of how Randy relates to Frank. Tensions simmer even as father and son perform the simple act of repairing a lawn chair together.

Alexander and Nuner generate remarkable chemistry playing the explosive pair. But the script doesn't do justice to Randy: We learn too much about the father and not enough about the son. It's like watching a tennis match in which only one player gets to serve. Alexander returns masterfully, but we still only see half of his game.

Donna Stafford's spare, gray-scale scenic design features faux-stone painted floors, benches and raised platforms, making the space neutral and flexible for the "remembered" scenes. Historical photos, projected on the back wall's two screens, hover above the set and establish locations. Jeffrey E. Salzberg's well-crafted lighting shifts tone and intensity to enhance changes in mood and scene.

Judevine is memorable because of its vivid characters; some Vermonters still swear that a particular character in that play is based on *their* neighbor! Frank Wolf joins that list of fictional people so vibrantly animated by Budbill, and the play is a fitting tribute to his father. But the author's own counterpart in the script, Randy, remains too much of a cipher.