

Review: Budbill's new 'A Song for My Father' is stunning, powerful play

By Brent Hallenbeck, Free Press Staff Writer

MONTPELIER – David Budbill's new play "A Song for My Father" is a stunner, a powerful work that's both a painful analysis of and a loving elegy for a flawed patriarch whose life closely matches that of the Wolcott playwright's own father.

Budbill says the play is not directly autobiographical, but "A Song for My Father" carries so much weight in part because its story line – uneducated, hard-working father from Cleveland battles educated, poem-writing son who moved to Vermont – is so close to that of Budbill's own life. It's also such a strong play because it never takes a cheap shot at honesty even as the father and son are taking cheap shots at each other.

The Lost Nation Theater production that opened Thursday features taut performances from each of the four cast members, especially the two men who butt heads dynamically – John Alexander as the wayward son, Randy Wolf, and Bob Nuner as his tough-love father, Frank Wolf. Director Andrew Doe keeps the two-hour play on a steady, unflinching track throughout.

The play unfolds essentially as a memory pouring out of Randy's head as he sits at his laptop and reflects on his life with his family. The memories bounce between time references, from his father's late-in-life stay in a nursing home (which he blames in part on Randy shuffling him off there) to flashbacks to Randy's more easy-going relationship with his mother, Ruth (played by Ruth Wallman), who died when Randy was only 29.

The focus on his mother's death provides one of the most beautiful moments in "A Song for My Father," when Randy tells Frank of a line of poetry he wrote right after she died depicting his bereft father's "hands trailing his wife's ghost like a child's blanket." Tender episodes such as that give "A Song for My Father" its depth, showing that the animosity between father and son is a particular tragedy because there are so many layers of love lying beneath.

The love gets lost in the anger the two men swing wildly at each other like a fiery mace. Frank, a seventh-grade dropout, admits to pride when Randy graduates from college yet rips into him for his book learning that does him no good in the real world ("What good's a college education going to do you in the screw department of the hardware store?"). Randy, meanwhile, lashes out at his father for marrying a woman named Ivy (also played by Wallman) who's a dead ringer for Frank's late wife yet acts nothing like her, forgetting through his selfish reaction that Ivy erases that loneliness in Frank that so moved Randy after his mother died.

Rage is a weapon that's been passed from generation to generation among the Wolfs, like a family heirloom. One of the play's most powerful scenes shows that the often irrational anger the two men bounce off each other like sharp rocks comes directly from Frank's own father.

As difficult as those seething scenes can be, the sweet ones can be even more wrenching, as when Randy spends anguishing but loving time with his father in the nursing home as he succumbs to dementia. "I wish he would die," Randy tells himself, "so my future wouldn't look so clear."

"A Song for My Father" is a heavy play broken by tremendous touches of humor, from Frank's overt flirting with his nursing-home caretaker (Tara Lee Downs) to his confusion when Randy tells his skirt-chasing father that the "libido never dies" and Frank thinks he's referring to a theater called the Lido that went out of business years ago. Frank also utters a line while in the nursing home as he glances into the audience – "Look at all these old people" – that could be interpreted as a gentle poke by Budbill at the graying of theater audiences or, in a deeper sense, at how we'll all one day be in that situation Frank finds himself in.

Nuner, a veteran of Lost Nation and Vermont Stage, is astounding as Frank, smacking the audience with his brutal honesty in his younger, confident days and evincing sincere sympathy as the confused, scared, senile old man. Alexander, a standout in recent works by the Green Candle Theatre Co., brings out the self-centered elements that Budbill built into Randy, but infuses him with the humanity the audience needs to identify with the universal, un-winnable situation he finds himself in, living far from his father both physically and philosophically as his father heads toward his dying days in a restless haze of dementia.

"A Song for My Father" echoes famed works such as the Arthur Miller play "Death of a Salesman" and the Jonathan Franzen novel "The Corrections" for its depictions of the battles between father and son and the toll dementia can take on a family. Budbill has created a work that aspires to classic heights while staying true to his own life and, in many ways, the lives of everyone.