

Married, with pets

By Ruth Wallman
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The Vermont Stage Company kicks off its third season at Burlington's Flynnstage with a recent Broadway smash that is making its way through the region. "Sylvia," by A.R. Gurney, is a hilarious commentary on mid-life angst, and the role pets play in our lives.

Greg and Kate are city-dwellers who are adjusting to life after children. Kate's career as an academic is taking off, while Greg is being transferred to ever more meaningless and unsatisfying work. In a walk in the park, Greg finds an adorable poodle mix with a tag indicating her name is Sylvia. Perhaps she finds him. He brings her home, fleas and all.

Sylvia immediately establishes herself as Greg's constant companion. She does what pets do: she's loves him unconditionally, for a dog. She's frisky and playful, tireless, loves to be petted and scratched, and hangs on his every word. Soon Greg is avoiding work so he can bask in her delightful company. Kate recognizes a rival for Greg's affections and a threat to her marriage, and tries to get Greg to give Sylvia up. Soon Greg must choose between wife and dog. It is not an easy decision for him.

The parallel to a man in mid-life crisis with a lover right under his wife's nose is unmistakable and sets up a series of scenes both farcical and a little discomfiting. Should Greg follow his passion to the exclusion on everything else? In one splendid scene at the park, Greg and Tom, the owner of a superbly virile Bowser, observe their pooches in the bushes, and reveal their obsessive relationships with their animals, perhaps to the exclusion of human ones.

"Sylvia" is a tour-de-force for actors, and these performances are wonderful. As played by the effervescent Kathryn Blume, Sylvia is cute, sexy, innocent, knowing, loyal and amoral, when in the company of Bowser. She is superbly costumed by Jenny Fulton, to mirror the progress of her relationship with Greg. She starts out looking like a street waif, and progresses from ooh-la-la to downtown chic. Stephen Bradbury as Greg is marvelous as a man discovering how to restore fun to his life. He is the perfect foil to Blume's antics, and together they push the relationship to its outer bounds. Betsy Jessie is lovely in her frustration; hers is a somewhat thankless role, as she is the spoiler to Greg and Sylvia's joy. John Alexander is a revelation in three roles. He brings down the house as Phyllis, a society matron who Sylvia tackles where dogs like to tackle. His Tom is just this side of hysteria, and the androgynous Leslie is a vision of controlled fury.

"Sylvia" is one of the few plays VSC has chosen that suits perfectly the pocket-sized Flynnspace. Director Stephan Golux moves his actors, and his swinging set-changers, seamlessly. Hallie Zieselman's lighting creates wonderful spaces for the action, never better than a hilarious and touching trio with Sylvia in silk pjs with a guitar, and Greg and Kate in alternate corners of the stage.

This is must-see theater, not only for the excellence of the production, but also for the clever commentary on life and love in the middle years. You will never look at Fido or Fifi the same way again.