



A lush 'Garden' in full bloom

By Barbara Vitello |

It would be easy to attribute the onstage chemistry between Carmen Roman and James Leaming, stars of Todd Logan's "Botanic Garden," to their offstage relationship.

Easy, but not entirely accurate.

Married in real life, the American Theater Company ensemble members have not played each other's onstage love interest in more than 20 years. Their relationship adds a particular poignancy to Canamac Productions' world premiere of Logan's play about a widow moving on with her life following the death of her husband. That they so convincingly play the imperfect couple in Logan's portrait of an imperfect marriage has less to do with their relationship than it does with their considerable talent.

The meticulous, extraordinarily aware Roman and the purposeful Leaming are consummate pros. There's not a false note between them and together they make something special of this fairly routine domestic drama.

Able directed by Oscar-winner Olympia Dukakis, "Botanic Garden" is an inventively constructed portrait of an imperfect marriage between people who always loved each other, even when they didn't get along. It opens with Kate's imaginary conversation with her dead husband Jake, while she nervously awaits the arrival of her date, the first since Jake's death two years earlier, who intends to take her to the titular garden.

The half dozen or so scenes that follow shift between their present day conversation and scenes from their marriage, scenes that will ring familiar to anyone married a long time. There's the estrangement in the early years in which the stay-at-home mom resents her workaholic husband who sacrificed his dream for a steady job. There's the dangerous, empty nest era where a couple either rediscovers each other or discover someone new. And there's the anguished final years, when illness and death part them.

The play is satisfactory, no more, no less. But it has moments of brilliance, namely the wrenching penultimate scene where Leaming's distraught Jake confesses to Roman's shattered Kate his fears death will erase their life together. It's a moving, painfully honest scene. Leaming and Roman perform it flawlessly. Chalk it up to chemistry if you like, there's no denying the talent.

"Botanic Garden"

3 stars out of four

Location: Victory Gardens Greenhouse theater, 2257 N. Lincoln Ave., Chicago

Times: 7:30 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays; 4 and 7:30 p.m. Saturdays; 2:30 p.m. Sundays through March 9

Running Time: About 80 minutes, no intermission

Tickets: \$35

Parking: Discounted parking in the Childrens' Memorial Hospital parking garage

Box office: (773) 871-3000 or www.victorygardens.org

Rating: Suitable for adults