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THEATER

Miss Teen Makes World Premiere at Stages Repertory Theatre

"She was *almost* beautiful."

BY [DONI WILSON](#) • 4/18/2016 AT 2:20PM

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Morgan Starr (left) and Emily Neves (right) in Stages Repertory Theatre's production of *Miss Teen*.

IMAGE: [BRUCE BENNETT](#)

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU'RE NOT THE COOLEST GIRL AT SCHOOL, BUT WIN A BEAUTY CONTEST ANYWAY?

That's exactly what happens in 1984-set *Miss Teen*, when Margaret Biddle takes the prize in what appears to have been a sort of cosmic fluke. Reflecting on the moment, her mother Coco says, "She was almost beautiful!" That word, *almost*, is key to the play, which explores the American Dream through the prism of peers, parents, and the marketing machine of retail and pop culture.

Written by Vancouver playwright Michele Riml, the work received its world premiere in Houston April 6. Riml says the story isn't as much about Margaret as about Coco, her pushy mother. "It is the idea that we can somehow 'do and have it all' and not sacrifice some important part of ourselves in the process," says Riml. "I felt that the idea of *Miss Teen* is a good metaphor for the mask that many women feel they have to wear to deal with the particular pressures of perfectionism our culture demands."

The play follows Coco's journey from her childhood, spent in an orphanage, to parenthood and its attendant financial and social pressures. Not only does she have two teenage girls, one of them autistic, she also takes care of her former husband, who's dying of cancer (he never appears on stage). With Margaret's big win, and the possibility of winning the Miss Teen pageant at nationals, Coco must now adopt another role: stage mother and bankroller for all things pageant-related. It forces the single mother to make bizarre, risky, even criminal choices to keep the dream alive.

As Margaret, Emily Neves brings a believable range of emotions to her role in a play that sometimes borders on the unbelievable, and it's impossible not to empathize with her. The shy, bookish teenager is under enormous pressure. One of my favorite moments was when she comes in late from partying wearing a Madonna-inspired get-up, a reminder that the '80s icon constantly reinvented herself.

“Margaret is the ultimate teen of the ’80s—exuberant, smart and eager to be accepted by her peers,” says director Kenn McLaughlin. “But she is also the primary target for a marketing program...that changed forever the way in which young women were treated by retailers and pop culture in general...Margaret’s ascension up the pageant ladder illuminates the shifts in economics and social mores.”

Elaine Robinson plays Dusty Dawson, the manager of Evergreen Mall’s exploitative “sponsorship” of the new Miss Teen. She does an admirable job portraying a character that represents the crass commercialism that the beauty industry promotes—part of the equation of making women feel “less than”—even from a very early age.

Morgan Starr is excellent as Nicole Biddle, the autistic younger sister of Margaret and the only character not buying into the glamour machine of the pageant industry. Riml employs Nicole to remind us how crazy our consumerism and obsession with female beauty can be. Starr plays the role without condescension or excessive exaggeration; she’s consistent and convincing, with facial responses that often say it all.

As Coco, Elizabeth Ann Townsend deftly channels her character’s pain, stress, and desperation for her daughter’s success. She’s deeply human—the quintessential Riml creation. “I’m fascinated by relationships and what makes people tick and connect,” says Riml. “I like flawed, wounded characters who are trying to do better.”

McLaughlin allows the entire play to remain in the apartment, with only minimal scene changes to Dawson’s desk, and the use of the apartment table and chair for pageant floats and Coco’s (embellished) memories of being “May Queen” in her youth. The audience must imagine these settings, and it works well. Stages is an intimate theater, particularly well-suited to the play. We can feel the claustrophobia not only of the two-bedroom apartment, but of limited choices.

While the evening features music from Madonna, The Eurhythmics and The GoGos,

the play is timeless. With so much going wrong simultaneously, you can hardly wrap your mind around it, but that seems to be part of Riml’s point. It works well enough that it’s easy to forgive the predictability of Coco’s fast and furious epiphanies at the end of the play.

Through May 1. Tickets starting at \$19. Wednesdays and Thursdays at 7:30 p.m., Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00 p.m., and Sundays at 3:00 p.m. Stages Repertory Theatre, 3201 Allen Parkway, Ste. 101. 713-527-0123. stagestheatre.com

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