

REVIEW

'The Cake' is a bittersweet treat

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Mary Cusack



Julia Glander as Della in Williamston Theatre's production of "The Cake." (CHRIS PURCHIS)

A story based on a Supreme Court case about discrimination against a gay couple might not sound like a fun night out at the theater, but it is. Williamston Theatre's production of "The Cake" slices through the headlines and serves up a luscious, rich tale of human emotion with a sprinkling of personal evolution.

Southern baker Della (Julia Glander) has just been booked as a contestant on a national baking competition show. The daughter of her late best friend comes home to plan her wedding and asks Della to make the cake. When Della finds out that Jen (Katie Terpstra) is marrying a woman, Della struggles between her faith and her love of Jen to make the right decision whether to make the cake.

A quality cake that is worth the calories has lots of sugar, fat, frosting and flavor. Della instructs the audience that you can't skimp on the ingredients when making a cake, and Williamston certainly doesn't skimp. "The Cake" has the highest quality ingredients, including Kirk Domer's spectacular set, Michelle Raymond and Emily Sutton-Smith's sumptuous cake props and the excellent acting.

Still, all of the production ingredients can fall flat if the script is lacking. In this case, playwright Bekah Brunstetter digs deep into her roots to write what she knows, and the script forms a fantastic batter for the final product. Brunstetter is from North Carolina and understands the complexity of this critical issue through the lens of people raised on the Good Book. She has empathy for all of the characters, and she develops them with love and respect while exposing their flaws.

Glander is outstanding as Della, who literally and figuratively lays herself bare as the conflict between her beliefs and her love for Jen makes her face the emptiness in her own life. Glander's performance is so engaging that it would be easy to overlook the skill of the rest of the cast.

Terpstra at first seems high strung and shallow, but Jen is a young woman caught between two worlds, desperately trying to bring them together to heal the rift in her own heart. There is comfort in returning home to Southern roots, yet the Christian values with which she was raised and are still held by her friends and family would condemn the person she has become. Terpstra lets Jen be emotionally messy and raw, yet hopeful and loving as she continues to synthesize past and future.

The most easily underappreciated performance is that of Alex Leydenfrost as Tim, Della's husband. Tim is a masculine everyman who quietly supports his wife while burying his feelings deeper than the septic tanks he works on. Leydenfrost's performance is subtle, but heart wrenching, when Tim's veneer cracks just a little as he shares his secret shame.

Brunstetter's script was inspired by the famous Supreme Court case *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, in which the owners of the shop sued for the right to refuse service to gay couples based on religious beliefs. It can be easy to demonize others for beliefs that oppose our own, but Brunstetter opens up the conversation by creating deeply complex, flawed characters who may be a lot like the people in our neighborhood.

“The Cake”

Performances through April 24

8 p.m. Thursday — Saturday

3 p.m. Saturday & 2 p.m. Sunday

Tickets start at \$28

Williamstontheatre.org