

‘The Cake’ at Williamston is filling with great writing and performances

REVIEW

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WILLIAMSTON, Mich.—By now, most of us are familiar with the culture war between evangelical Christians and the LGBTQ community in which florists, bakers and venue managers have tried to exert their preference to not take the custom of gay couples getting married. Indeed, one case went all the way to the Supreme Court, with a conservative majority siding with businesses who want to rest their objections on their religious beliefs if not bigotry.

Out of this culture war, playwright and network TV writer Bekah Brunstetter wrote *The Cake*, a story about a lesbian couple who travel to North Carolina to one of the bride’s hometowns to make plans for a Fall wedding and stop to see a close friend of her Mother’s who is a master cake baker. The baker, Della (Julia Glander), is a Paula Dean-type Southern bible-quoting “bless your heart” childless wife who has long loved her friend’s daughter, Jen (Katie Terpstra) as her own. Jen and bride Macy (Alexandra Taylor) have been living in Brooklyn, a far more hospitable environment to lesbian weddings than Winston-Salem, NC from where Brunstetter hails.



The Cake is often called an “issue play,” which can doom any play to short-lived relevance. Not so with this play. The strength of *The Cake* is that I can well imagine the play holding up just fine a decade from now as it is not based on headlines or one court docket, but rather a conflict of cultures and within families that is not going away any time soon. Too, the two characters most in conflict—Della and Macy—travel a journey in the show with each growing in believable, inspiring ways.

Julia Glander as Della in *The Cake*: Directed by Jasmine Rivera

Brunstetter is a superior writer of both narrative and dialogue. Even when she gets into some potentially stereotypical cultural differences—Macy’s refusal of sugar and dairy—she handles the writing in a restrained way that makes us laugh, and they aren’t cheap laughs. It helps that Director Jasmine Rivera cast the play with superb actors. Glander’s Della is not a hate-worthy character, even by the most lefty of audience members. With the help of Brunstetter’s writing and Glander’s portrayal, we see that her struggle

is real and heartfelt. She is a product of her upbringing and surroundings, particularly the religious “principles” drilled into her since she was a girl. But she is also full of love for Jen, as well as her husband, Tim (Alex Leydenfrost) who is a hard-working, but aloof (until the end of the play) figure.

Another sub-plot (the sit-com formula Brunsetta is terrific with) is three concentric plots) involves Della’s forthcoming competition in a baking reality show. From time to time, Della’s thinking takes her to imagining her star turn with show host George’s disembodied voice (voiced by Tobin Hissong) offering commentary. The construction of *The Cake* is as disciplined and well executed as one of Della’s beautiful cakes.

The sub-plot of Della’s marital issues with Tim is not isolated from the main story, but rather connected to a theme that love requires that we put some work into understanding and accepting the people we love, whether they be a spouse, child or friend. The story also puts forth the idea that people need to work through their own love relationships according to what their hearts and heads will allow, rather than bouncing them off the subjective writings of institutions and pronouncements of people representing those institutions. And Brunsetter, paying close attention to irony and detail, uses a passage from one of Paul’s letters from the New Testament to turn on the lights for the characters in her story—Paul being the only writer in the New Testament who referred directly to homosexuality, passages that are often leaned on by the religious right to condemn or marginalize LGBTQ people.

The set for the play, designed by Kirk Domer, is spot on with a backdrop of non-matching plates of different designs and sizes glued to the wall, just as a bakery might do, but also to connect us to the notion that we are all of different shades, sizes and patterns. Costumes by Lupe Vazquez. Prop design and set dressing by Michelle Raymond. Lighting design by Becca Bedell. Sound design by Julia Garlotte.

The strength of *The Cake* is that it celebrates hope, and feeds hope for something that is central to Christianity—Reconciliation. God knows, with friends cancelling one another for transgressions real and imagined, and families ruptured over conflicting tribal loyalties, feeding hope for reconciliations without slipping into bad writing is a noble calling for a play.