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Family dysfunction, with bioterror added

By Toby Zinman
For The Inquirer

Don't be misled by Nice People Theatre Company's benign name: If ever a play wasn't "nice," it's Marisa Wegrzyn's *Psalms of a Questionable Nature*. Bioterroristic parents certainly send family dysfunctionality off the charts, and with the suicide of the suspected anthrax mailer recently in the news, this drama ratchets up our anxiety about weird, creepy threats. It's a short, intense drama that carries a jolt.

The action takes place in the basement of an old house that has been converted into a dilapidated lab. Greta (Janice Rowland), an uptight news announcer of "unrelenting stoicism," meets Moo (Rachel Joffred), her peculiar, emotionally stunted stepsister. Moo's father and Greta's mother, having had what was apparently a passionate marriage, filled with sex and dancing, were recently killed in a car crash; the house was left to Greta, who wants to clean it out and sell it.

In the course of the cleaning, she discovers vials, each labeled with the name of a deadly infectious disease. As the plot develops, the parents' death becomes one mystery; their neglect and abandonment of their daughters, another. Then it turns out Greta has been recently released from prison. She has a daughter, and some nasty mystery surrounds her, too.

Moo's helplessness and neediness is endearing, while simultaneously revealing a person who is very dangerous, a person who used to work in a slaughterhouse. A person whose name is "Moo." And there was a fire. And the sheriff keeps coming by.

There are, perhaps, too many mysteries piled on (they are all solved, but no spoilers here). The play's point seems to be that such crazy parents create damaged and crazy daughters, women who either feel too little or feel too much: "We are horrible people who came from horrible people."

The religious theme suggested by the title is too little developed, although we do learn that the mother's Bible has been the weapon of choice, both physically and psychologically.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh directs this two-hander in a difficult space, using the stairs cleverly to move the action and the relationship.

The set, designed by Caitlin Lainoff, suggests a location both ramshackle and toxic.

Both Joffred and Rowland turn in performances that never slacken, making these extreme characters surprisingly convincing.

Psalms of a Questionable Nature

Presented by Nice People Theatre Company at Walnut Studio 5, Ninth and Walnut Streets, through Nov. 9.

Tickets: \$10. Information: www.nicepeopletheatre.org or 267-909-3309.

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In "Psalms of a Questionable Nature," Janice Rowland (left) and Rachael Joffred play stepsisters with horrible family secrets.

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