

Lynn
Redgrave

collected stories

With 'Stories,' an ending that's worth the wait

By Douglas J. Keating
Philadelphia Inquirer Theater Critic

"I don't care what the basis of the story is as long as it's a good story," the experienced author tells the fledgling writer she is mentoring in *Collected Stories*.

That and other pieces of advice from the teacher - among them, "You got a story to tell, you just tell it" and "What is art, if not an exaggeration of the truth?" - should be kept in mind, for they are relevant to the last scene of Donald Margulies' play, which the Contemporary Stage Company is presenting at the Baby Grand Theatre of the Grand Opera House.

You'll have to hold those thoughts for a while, though. Margulies takes a long time, much of it uneventful and filled with somewhat too much talk, about the craft of writing. Yet when he gets to the conclusion, it is so substantive, engrossingly written, and tuned to the emotions of the play's two characters, that it's worth the wait.

Collected Stories makes especially fine theater because of Lynn Redgrave. This is Contemporary Stage Company's debut, and while an actress of Redgrave's reputation certainly draws audiences to the inaugural production, there is much more here than the presence of a big name: Redgrave gives a superb performance, especially in the terrific final scene.



Lynn Redgrave and Karina Mackenzie star as mentor and writing student in the Wilmington production.

It is not usually a good idea for a reviewer to reveal something important that comes up at the end of a play. However, an exception has to be made for *Collected Stories* because Margulies does not reveal until the penultimate scene what the play is really about, and it is not until the ending that he develops the key issue into a dramatic confrontation between his characters.

The question is this: Does a writer have the right to take a living person's experience and turn it into fiction without that person's permission? This might not sound like the stuff of compelling theater, but Margulies and Redgrave make it so.

Redgrave plays Ruth Steiner, a single writer in her 60s. In the opening scene, she has a tutorial session with Lisa Morrison (Karina Mackenzie), who is taking a creative-writing course with her. The first five scenes of the play follow the deepening personal relationship between the pair over the next six years.

The ambitious, talented Lisa becomes the prickly, outspoken Ruth's professional and personal assistant, and Ruth becomes the younger woman's mentor, encouraging her through the publication of her first collection of short stories. She comes to regard Lisa as the daughter she never had.

Along the way, the very private Ruth, mostly under gentle prodding from Lisa, reveals details of her early days as an aspiring writer in bohemian Greenwich Village, and when Lisa gives a prepublication reading from her first novel in the next-to-last scene, it is clear she has given much of Ruth's experience to a fictional writer of her own devising. She also gives an advance copy of the book to Ruth, who is furious over what she regards as Lisa's appropriation of *her* life.

In the final scene, Lisa goes to visit Ruth and tries to defend what she has done to her mentor. Redgrave's performance finds Ruth's deep sense of hurt and betrayal as well as her abrasive nastiness as she passionately defends her life and experience as solely her own property.

Lisa is often difficult to figure, partly because Margulies doesn't fully develop her motivations. Mackenzie's portrayal, though, lacks depth. However, she does offer an attractive, skillfully rendered surface portrayal, and she plays very well with Redgrave.

New Yorker Kent Paul directs, and Michael Schweikardt's detailed evocation of Steiner's book-filled, messy apartment seems like just the place the

character Redgrave portrays would inhabit.

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