

BRIGHT HALF LIFE

★★★★

Through March 4
Manbites Dog Theater, Durham
www.manbitesdogtheater.org

With This Ring

SMALL LIFE DECISIONS AND BIG CULTURAL SHIFTS CAST CONCENTRIC RIPPLES IN A SAME-SEX INTERRACIAL PARTNERSHIP

BY BYRON WOODS

The quote's a paraphrase of Kierkegaard: "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward." But what happens when playwright Tanya Barfield takes us sideways instead, through four and a half decades of a lesbian relationship, in her drama *Bright Half Life*?

Under the direction of Jules Odendahl-James, promise and mischief are both afoot in the opening scene of this Manbites Dog Theater production, as Tamara Kissane's Erica slyly, silently checks out JoRose's Vicky during their first encounter in an office elevator. We shortly learn that Vicky is the supervisor and Erica's a new temp—a teacher and writer moonlighting in data-entry.

But as Barfield saws back and forth across time through brief, nonchronological sequences, crucial cross-sections of this long-term liaison are ultimately revealed. (How long-term? Given their various ups and downs, the history of marriage equality, and resistance from Vicky's family, twenty years pass between their first encounter and their wedding.)

After the giddiness of their early courtship, a mellow playfulness pervades as the pair searches for a kite and a new mattress. And Barfield deals frankly with several of their early challenges, especially when they confront the racial divide in their own partnership.

But when an early career sacrifice made by one on behalf of the other becomes a point of resentment later on, we see how the impact of decisions and events can ripple concentrically across adjacent years and ultimately influence the shape of the relationship.

Erica is described as "soft butch" in Barfield's script, and Kissane thoroughly explores her character through body language in an entirely different way from what we've seen from her in previous roles. JoRose finds both demure and candid notes in Vicki. And Joseph Amodei's soundscape suggests



JoRose and Tamara Kissane
in *Bright Half Life* PHOTO BY ALEX MANESS

the ambience of a home at certain points with the hum of a fridge or an HVAC unit in the background.

Yet domesticity doesn't come easy for Erica. A deep-seated fear of impermanence haunts her throughout this recombinant chronicle, along with other anxieties. Nervously noting that all natural objects (including stars, fireflies, and us) have half-lives, she fears that love will fade. Jenni Mann Becker's evocative lighting sometimes evokes those fireflies and stars, and Sonya Leigh Drum's minimal set provides a metaphorical route for a couple's long walk together.

Barfield's both a romantic and a realist. Over the forty-five years we spend with them, Erica and Vicky confront multiple challenges, including mortality. What's uncanny about *Bright Half Life* is not what falls away over the decades, but what persists instead. Thankfully, in the warm final scenes, the half-life of love remains unknown.

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Nina Chanel Abney, Untitled (FLUX THE TOP) (detail), 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 72 × 108 inches (182.88 × 274.32 cm). Collection of Kansas Forest. Image courtesy of Kravitz-Welby Gallery, New York, New York. © Nina Chanel Abney.

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