

THEATER

# Merrimack is back

## Theater returns with 'Holly Fudge'

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**LOWELL** » Merrimack Repertory Theatre is open again after nearly two years in the dark, and Artistic Director Courtney Sale commissioned a wonderfully relatable holiday comedy to mark its return.

"The Rise and Fall of Holly Fudge" explores the stress that everyone seems to feel when family comes together for the holiday season.

But this production has a few timely twists on traditional family disputes as it reunites a mother and daughter separated by a continent and a culture changing more rapidly on the West Coast than the East Coast, especially in Brockton, where the play is set.

It is Christmas 2020 so the COVID-19 pandemic has the nation on edge and upset about quarantines, family separations and social justice protests. And social justice protests are, in some ways, a character in the play.

The four actors' performances are excellent, blending comedy with the changes that the pandemic has forced on us all.

Carol, played by Merrimack Repertory Theatre veteran Karen McDonald, is busily decorating her home in anticipation of her daughter Holly's return from Seattle. Christmas is the season in which Carol gets to shine. She makes batches of Holly fudge to share with friends and co-workers, and she has won blue ribbons for her confection.

As she decorates, she chats with her friend Chris, played by Millicent Wright, and speculates that Holly may be in a new relationship. Chris says she doesn't want to pry, but then asks Carol why she thinks that.

A flustered and anxious Carol says, "Just little things." Chris responds, "Like what?" Carol answers, "She's a private person. ... What's with this word 'queer?'"

Then the phone rings. It's Holly (Kristian Espiritu), who tells her mother she's bringing her partner, Jordan (Eliza Martin Simpson), home with her for Christmas.

"Why is this Jordan so available on Christmas, doesn't he have family?" Carol asks. "Oh, I see. When



COURTESY OF MEGHAN MOORE

Millicent Wright, left, and Karen MacDonald appear in 'The Rise and Fall of Holly Fudge' at Merrimack Repertory Theatre.



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Karen MacDonald, left, and Kristian Espiritu star in 'The Rise and Fall of Holly Fudge' at Merrimack Repertory Theatre.

did you tell me about her?" thus she is available for Jordan is also Jewish, and Christmas. But don't say

"Hanukkah" is like Christmas for Jews, she warns.

Then follows a funny sequence of scenes in which a Greek chorus, of sorts, protests outside a neighbor's house, "No justice, no peace." Holly complains to her mother about naming her fudge after her.

Carol wants to know why Holly says she is queer, not lesbian.

Carol and Chris engage in a slapstick altercation. Holly and Jordan meanwhile have a verbal argument that nearly ends their relationship.

The Greek chorus gets louder. The reason for the protest is unknown until Jordan storms out of the house to join them.

In the end, of course, all is right with Carol and Chris's friendship and with Holly and Jordan's relationship.

"The Rise and Fall of Holly Fudge" runs through Dec. 19 at Liberty Hall. Video-on-demand performances of "The Rise and Fall of Holly Fudge" will be available from Dec. 20-Jan. 4.

Welcome back, Merrimack Repertory Theatre, and happy holidays!