

Gripping 'Oceanside' premieres with MRT

By KATHLEEN PALMER

Staff Writer

What do you do when your idyllic second marriage is confronted by the messy, self-destructive truth of your first marriage? What do you do when your drunken ex dumps himself at your doorway, bringing your past – and horrific concerns for your future – into your new life?

Those are just some of the brutal questions the protagonist faces in the world premiere of Nick Gandiello's "Oceanside," via the Merrimack Repertory Theatre production running through March 8 at their home stage in Lowell, Mass.

Gwen, portrayed by Carolyn Baeumler, thought she had successfully walked away from her troubled past.

But then her ex-husband Tommy (played by Joey Collins) returns with news of their grown daughter Ginnie's disappearance, and with him come the demons that she sought to erase from her idyllic new life with second husband Kevin (Allyn Burrows).

Kevin and Gwen's lovely home in Oceanside, Long Island (kudos to scenic designer Judy Gailen) becomes ground zero for Gwen and Tommy's strategizing and debating how to go about finding their errant art-student daughter, who hasn't contacted either of them for an unusually long period of time. Gwen resists dragging the authorities into it, tersely holding on to the fact of Ginnie's "free spirit" attitude, and her own fierce pride at allowing her daughter her "freedom" – a gift she wasn't afforded herself in her youth. Tommy eventually reveals information he has on their daughter's life

IF YOU GO

Merrimack Repertory Theatre presents 'Oceanside'

WHEN: Through March 8. See website for dates and times.

WHERE: Nancy L. Donohue Theatre, 50 E. Merrimack St., Lowell, Mass.

COST: \$20-\$60.

INFORMATION: 1-978-654-4678, box_office@mrt.org, or www.mrt.org.

that is unknown to Gwen, and Kevin and Tommy convince her to begin the process of a missing-persons investigation.

In one scene, where the three are debating the subject, whether intentional or

not, Kevin's placement of literally one foot on each part of the stage, exactly in the middle between Gwen and Tommy, was a great visual representation of his role in the dynamic. Burrows' Kevin is the older, wiser, level-headed one, with "the good job" – he's a school district superintendent, to Tommy's vague "lighting specialist." Kevin's children are models of enforced-rules parenting; Tommy tries to poke holes in their purported angelic behavior with interrogations that end with a petulant "... that you know of."

The competition between the two men vacillates; they put it away a couple times to join forces in helping Gwen deal with the disappearance of Ginnie. Tommy is able to make blue-collar fixes around the house that his white-collar replacement cannot. But the tension always returns, with Kevin demanding his

luckless predecessor leave their home, where he's crashed for days. Not the least of the reasons for this desire is that Tommy and the situation have pushed Gwen off the wagon. When the exes sink into more and more drinking, things go from bad to worse.

Baeumler's Gwen tries so hard to cling to the white-washed persona she's given her wayward daughter. It's heartbreaking to watch her slowly dissolve, clinging to her delusions right to the bitter end. Her conflicting feelings for Tommy aren't helping, either. She knows Kevin is better for her, but ... The "but" that so many women struggle with: Their shared history, their daughter, a whole part of her life that, flawed and ruinous as it may have been, she still struggles to let go of.

The set is lovely; the living room flows out onto the oceanside patio and hot tub, each area designated with different flooring. My friend joked that Easter on Long Island would not lend itself to an open concept and being outdoors without parkas, but we tried to suspend our disbelief over that detail. John Malinowski's lighting design faded the colors of a seaside sunset in and out on the back panels in a beautiful effect paired with the haunting cries of seagulls.

The show is gripping and an excellent character study. Collins' Tommy was the standout for this reviewer. But each actor is strong and able to relay the many facets and conflicts – above the surface and below – that each character endures. You'll be engaged and paying rapt attention, right until the last moment, as you too desperately hope for Ginnie's phone call.

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Photo courtesy of MEGHAN MOORE

From left, Joey Collins, Carolyn Baeumler and Allyn Burrows in "Oceanside," presented at Merrimack Repertory Theatre in Lowell, Mass., through Mar. 8.



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