

San Francisco Chronicle

Monday, April 11, 2011

Hitting The Road Blazed By Nabokov

By Robert Hurwitt



Lolita Roadtrip: Drama. By Trevor Allen. Directed by Lee Sankowich. Through May 1. San Jose Stage Company, 490 S. First St., San Jose. Two hours, 25 minutes. \$20-\$45. (408) 283-7142, www.thestage.org.

"Once upon a time there was a little girl who loved to tell stories," says Chloë Bronzan's determined but fragile graduate student in Trevor Allen's "Lolita Roadtrip." The little girl isn't the only one.

Stories - true, false and in between - intersect, overlap and jostle each other to telling effect in the San Jose Stage world premiere that opened Saturday, co-presented with PlayGround, which commissioned the play.

A professor (Julian López-Morillas) lectures about "Lolita," and one of the true stories that inspired it. His wife (Stacy Ross, in one of several sharp roles), dying of cancer, spins tales from the patches in her quilt. Vladimir Nabokov (López Morillas) describes the life cycles of monarch butterflies. A park ranger, tourists and even a Civil War ghost get into the act.

Mostly, though, the stories are those of the student, Julia; the professor; and Danny (Patrick Alparone), the edgy but innocent teen street hustler who hitches a ride with her from New York to California. Julia is retracing the route of Nabokov's 1941 trip to Stanford for her dissertation. As their trip progresses, seamlessly staged by Lee Sankowich on a revolving set, and her stories intersect with Danny's tales of sexual abuse, the real purpose of her trip emerges.

Some of the stories could be better told. There's nothing about the research Julia thinks she's doing, and Allen doesn't tell us enough about the professor's book to justify the significance it assumes. The wife's role isn't fully developed, and there's an aspect of Danny that strains credulity.

But the primary tales intertwine to increasingly disturbing effect in the cast's vital performances. Allen does more than vividly wrestle with "Lolita" and pedophilia. Beware the untrustworthy narrators as well.