

Theater XXX
Emily Thibodeau

Cracking a Granite Smile: A Response to *Blackberry Winter*¹

Steve Yockey's *Blackberry Winter* is a play about a woman, Vivienne, learning to face her mother's Alzheimer's through isolated memories and a "creation myth" she has written. In a combination of prose monologue and delicate verse, *Blackberry Winter* confronts the uncomfortable truths of powerlessness in the face of sickness.²

Blackberry Winter takes place in a world that combines reality and fantasy. Vivienne interacts with physical objects from her real life, but also exists on a stage with the characters from her "creation myth," namely, a White Egret and a Gray Mole. The script describes the playing space as "XX" (page number)³, which suggests that the playing space does not wish to imitate a realistic world, but rather, one where Vivienne can explore her feelings about her mother's disease through specific objects and memories.⁴ We are not operating in time, either: it could be eight in the morning on a Saturday, or eleven at night on a Wednesday when Vivienne decides to leave her "real" world and enter this one, and the play could take place over the course of a second of her life, or hours.

This whole world exists within the time it takes for Vivienne to decide to open the letter. She introduces the envelope with her first words on stage. She enters carrying it, with a stage direction that reads: "XX" (page number) and immediately explains that she already knows what the letter inside says. In the last moment of the play, she opens the envelope: "XX" (page

¹ Include a title

² End your introduction with a thesis statement that can frame your response

³ Quote the script like you would quote a book, including a parenthetical citation. If I was referencing more than one work, I would cite the quote with (Author #)

⁴ A quotation from the script describing the playing space, and an explanation of why that matters/what it means in a real performance

number). So, in the simplest interpretation, this play takes Vivienne from a place where she cannot open the letter to a place where she can--but how? By unraveling her completely, and by cracking her granite smile.

...

I found the actress to be charismatic and believable. Her style transitioned from happily chatty to genuinely hurting, and grasping to make sense out of a senseless situation. Karen Lefkoe, the actress playing Vivienne, performed wonderfully, portraying a much less corporate character than I imagined in my reading of the play.⁵ I know from our class discussion, though, that not everyone felt they could relate to Vivienne. One student in our class brought up the fact that he simply had not experienced anything like Vivienne's situation, and therefore found it difficult to connect to the play. In a piece like *Blackberry Winter*, where there is only one fully fleshed out character for the audience to connect to, so much depends upon the ability of the actress to demand attention, connection, and introspection from the audience.

One expectation that the production at the Flynnspace did not meet was the shadow puppetry described in the script.⁶ At the beginning of the first "creation myth" scene, the script reads, "XX" (page number). Nothing matching this description happened in the version we saw. Instead, this production used a slideshow-like-video, that had clip-art animals "acting" out the story behind the White Egret and the Gray Mole. While shadow puppetry would have been a beautiful addition, I found the clip-art gave the creation myth a more homemade feeling. A

⁵ Even though this is more of an emotional reaction to something I saw, I framed it critically and wrote with a clear purpose

⁶ A statement that there was a difference between what was written in the script and what happened in the production

magical shadow puppet display may have been too extravagant, too perfect, for a woman like Vivienne, who is currently just doing her best to hold herself together.⁷

The White Egret and Gray Mole also stayed onstage the whole time, sometimes playing parts in Vivienne's anecdotes, or sometimes simply watching. They added levity at some points, such as when the Gray Mole pretended to be a scarf rack in a store that Vivienne visited with her mother. At other times, especially as the play neared its end, they took up a calmer, more subdued role, sitting on the floor or standing by a pillar to watch Vivienne talk. At one point, as if on cue, Vivienne started to talk about how painful it is to watch her mother lose her memory, and the White Egret's remaining balloon dropped to the ground.⁸ In the script, the White Egret and the Gray Mole do not have as much of a presence on the stage when they are not performing the creation myth, but their participation in the production at the Flynnspace added another level of complexity to the play, and provided a useful distraction when I wanted to watch something other than Vivienne while she was speaking.

Blackberry Winter is a bold and ambitious play, which takes on difficult subjects in a difficult format, and succeeds beautifully. Ultimately, this play affected me much more than I expected, and touched me in ways I was not prepared for.⁹

⁷ My thoughts on how this change affected the production. It is not enough to simply state what differences exist; you should also consider in your paper how those changes affected the production

⁸ A description of a specific moment in the play that could not have been scripted. One example of how the added aspect of a performance separates writing in theater from writing about literature

⁹ Include a conclusion with a return to more general thoughts