

Grandma's past – intimate affair

The Outlook
RAVE! REVIEW

By Debbi K. Swanson

Deborah Clarinda Ross offers a simple evening of good old-fashioned storytelling in her play about life in Appalachia, "From My Grandmother's Grandmother Unto Me."

This common Appalachian phrase sites the average life of a good story – five generations – or about 100 years. She plays her ancestors with charm in a simple country dress, closed-toed shoes and stockings, donning a bonnet or other props to indicate a change in character.

Set on the front porch of the family home that has been in Ross' family since 1866 as designed by Michael Hidalgo, she begins by playing Fannie Eleanora Strawn, a woman of common sense and strong conviction whose mother's life had been saved by Indian women who watched over her for many months following a near fatal accident. She married the stubborn Ruben Hyden Tyler.

In about 80 minutes she moves through the female descendants of Fannie, who were Ross' direct ancestors, illustrating how each affected by the other. Fannie's daughter, Clara, was the first woman to be divorced in Chatsworth, Ga. She then suffered a stillborn with her second husband. Willie Sue's husband was wounded in the Battle of the Bulge yet they raised a mess of kids. The oldest Charlotte Ann, on whose stories this production is based, was an avid reader and fell in love with her high school history teacher who taught the subject like a "great big ol' story." Clarinda is the result, also divorced and remarried, with a daughter who is "developmentally delayed," with no clear reason why.

These are simple stories of a century of life in the rural mountains, at times a hardship yet rich in warmth and color. Like reading a good book, this welcome bit of intimacy in an impersonal, high-speed world reminds us, as Ross does in her closing remarks, to slow down and pay attention to our lives and those we love, for "it's our stories that makes us who we are."

Beyond this rather obvious observance that we all forget, she avoids the country life cliché of quilt making and instead sketches characters alive with independence.

Director David T. Thomas, a solid craftsman, also helped in develop the piece. Kathi O'Donohue lights it with subtle shifts.

"From My Grandmother's Grandmother Unto Me" plays at 8p.m. Wed-Sat. and 2 and 7p.m. on Sun. through Dec. 15 at The Odyssey Theater. 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd. West Los Angeles, Tickets: 310-477-2055 \$15-45