

Diary of Anne Frank as haunting as ever

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Sarah Chalmers as Anne Frank tries on the fur coat so beloved by Mrs. van Daan (Rayna Smith-Camp) in the Theatre Arts Guild's production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, running to April 21 in the community theatre's Pond Playhouse. (photo by Bruce Goodick)

I have never totally forgiven my mother for presenting me with *The Diary of Anne Frank* when I was 13.

I so strongly identified with the teen writer that the tragedy of her merciless death has always haunted me.

Theatre Arts Guild's powerful and moving production of *The Diary of Anne Frank* brings it all back as director Bill VanGorder and his cast vividly re-create the Amsterdam hideout where Anne and seven people escaped from the Nazis for over two years.

When Otto Frank's daughter Margot was called up to report for a German work camp, he hid his family in a secret third-floor annex to his office building. Joining the family were Hermann and Petronella van Daan and their son Peter, and a dentist, Mr. Dussel.

This play, a new adaptation by Wendy Kesselman from the 1956 Pulitzer-Prize winning drama by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, focusses on the eight's daily life full of challenges and squabbles as Anne journeys through her diary to deeper realizations about life.

Anne, in a charming, high-spirited performance by Sarah Chalmers, starts out hating her

mother and provoking the shy Peter. She is jealous of her perfect, quiet sister Margot, worships her father and barely puts up with her roommate, Mr. Dussel. Yet her vivacity and cheerfulness, her essentially giving nature, keep the others going from day-to-day.

VanGorder beautifully moves his fine ensemble of actors in an atmospherically-lit, highly detailed, living area almost the same size as the actual annex. Roxanne Smith based her set design, rooted in realism, on an exploding Star of David.

VanGorder creates lovely tableaux of the characters quietly about their business in a dim sepia light while bright light targets those talking dramatically.

The Hanukkah celebration with a lit menorah, Anne's gifts born of privation but so much appreciated and a lovely group song is very touching.

Esther VanGorder's sound design conveys the outside world in terms of radio news, the hostile German pronouncements against the Jews and suspicious noises.

Just as spring comes and hope blooms this story reaches its end with the sound of boots and German voices.

The end is so much sadder after the vitality, love and even occasional joy of the annex's inhabitants, beautifully made flesh by the actors.

Terry Coolen is a strong presence as the kind and decent Otto Frank. A dentist himself, Lowell Shore brings spice and sonorous vocals to Mr. Dussel. Rayna Smith-Camp adds deep humanity to the wealthy, sarcastic Mrs. van Daan in a conflicted marriage with the boorish Mr. van Daan (Patrick Charron).

All the actors are solid in their part including Jennifer Robbins as Anne's struggling mother, Maddi McKay as her resigned sister, Benjamin Leger as Peter, Joshua Law as Otto's business partner Mr. Kraler and Jocelyn Covert as the beloved Miep Gies, who delivers food and news to the annex.

Gies, who died in 2010 at the age of 100, recovered Anne's diary after the family was taken and gave it to Otto Frank at war's end. Otherwise this story would have been lost.

At the end of the two-and-a-half hour play with intermission I am haunted again by Anne and her faith in humanity and the future. She wrote: "I keep my ideals, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart."

In truth, I am always grateful to my mother – a huge believer in social justice – for opening my eyes with *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

This impassioned production by the long-running community theatre has a huge production team including producer Kate Hendry, lighting designer Gayle Hughson and costumes lead Pam Wood.

It runs to April 21, at the Pond Playhouse, 6 Parkhill Rd., with shows at 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and matinees at 2 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday. For ticket information go online (tagtheatre.com).