

Actresses shine as young writer and aging mentor in Second Thought Theatre's 'Collected Stories'

Saturday, August 30, 2008

By LAWSON TAITTE / The Dallas Morning News

ADDISON – A trip, make that a pilgrimage, to Addison is proof that **Pam Dougherty** and Allison Tolman are the best actresses of their generations hereabouts.



Pam Dougherty's torment contrasts Allison Tolman's quirky charm in Second Thought Theatre's two-character play.

On Thursday the performers opened Second Thought Theatre's fifth season in *Collected Stories*. Donald Margulies' script is probably the finest example of the burgeoning genre of two-character plays about youth and age.

Ms. Dougherty plays Ruth, a famous short-story writer with a reputation for being difficult. Ms. Tolman is Lisa, an awe-struck student who wants to impress Ruth.

Nearly all the action takes places in Ruth's Greenwich Village apartment, lovingly designed by Stew Awalt. (I especially liked the perspective painting seen through the window.)

Ruth is self-absorbed as Lisa comes for her first tutorial in a writing class. In the first minutes of the play, Mr. Margulies cleverly plants seeds that will develop into the plot – and even Lisa's short story that Ruth reads and critiques is symbolic.

Director Jocelyn Wiebe, in her Second Thought debut, has helped her stars dig deep. Ms. Dougherty has the leonine majesty that Ruth needs, and she ages heartbreakingly as the scenes carry us through the years.

Lisa offers an actress more options. Ms. Tolman persuasively emphasizes her clumsy innocence and awkward enthusiasm. The character quickly unveils her psyche to her teacher – and the audience – so we understand why she is so unsure of herself but so persistent and assertive.

Ms. Tolman ultimately makes Lisa more likable than other performers have; the character has a tenacity that can seem sharklike if the actress wants to go in that direction.

One of our most gifted comedians, Ms. Tolman finds a way to use her humor to dramatic ends. She integrates Lisa's quirks with her perceptiveness and sensitivity. It might be that Mr. Margulies wouldn't want Lisa to exude quite this much fragile charm, but we can be grateful for it anyway.

Ms. Dougherty is alternately imperious and tormented, but her most memorable moment is one of exultation. Her face glows as she tells a story from her past. She relives it, and so do we.