

Parent Traps

BY JOHN GLORE

Some of the most exquisite paintings are miniatures. Their subjects would be lost or blown out of proportion on a larger canvas. The artist's expertise shows itself in fine brush-strokes that render delicate features and sharp details.

Likewise, some plays work best writ small. One such is John Kolvenbach's *Goldfish*, an SCR commission having its world premiere on the Argyros Stage beginning in March. To be sure, big plays have been written about Kolvenbach's subjects — the breakdown of family relationships, the discovery of love — but this playwright isn't interested in the grand theatrical gesture. Instead he focuses in on the subtle interplay among four people — a father and his son, a daughter and her mother — detailing the quirks of each character and quietly dramatizing how the failings of the two parents impinge upon their young adult offspring as they seek an independent life.

The play begins (as it will end) with father and son: Albert, preternaturally mature at the age of nineteen, prepares his father, Leo, for a big change in both their lives. Albert is about to leave for his first year of college and he's more than a little concerned that his father won't be able to manage on his own. So the dutiful son is doing everything he can to make sure Leo won't disrupt the delicate balance they have managed to achieve. First and foremost, Albert has devised a strategy to protect his father's small pension from Leo's own worst impulses, but as he heads out the door to catch his bus, he can't shake his lingering doubts.

At school Albert excels in his studies and opts for solitude outside of class. But his plan hasn't accounted for Lucy, a girl who refuses to respect his privacy. Later we'll learn that Lucy has parental issues of her own, which is perhaps why she's drawn to Albert, but right now she's only interested in finding out what makes him so different from their classmates. Before long Lucy has completely overwhelmed Albert's defenses with her irresistible appeal (which Albert locates in the particular way she wears her sweater), and the two fall into a romantic entanglement.

Home for Thanksgiving, Lucy quizzes her hard-drinking mother, Emily, about the man she married and then left soon after he had fathered Lucy. Emily resists discussing the past, but Lucy's persistence won't be denied.

Emily soon guesses there must be a love interest behind Lucy's line of questioning and she's not happy about that development. Her typical parental argument — "You're only nineteen!" — is shadowed by a not-so-typical animus that even Lucy finds surprising.

But back at school Lucy and Albert continue their happy exploration of a love that looks to have staying power. The excitement of their passion is matched by the comfort of what feels to them like an inevitability. Alone all their lives with parents who leaned heavily on them, they now discover a kind of weightless joy in each other's company.

And that's when all of Albert's plans come undone.

Casting for *Goldfish* is not yet set, but Loretta Greco, who directed the play in its Pacific Playwrights Festival reading in May, will return to stage the production. Well known stage and screen actress Kathy Baker offered a funny, unsettling rendition of Emily in the reading and has agreed to return for the production. She was last seen at SCR in *The Man from Nebraska*.

Goldfish (the title has to do with something Leo once read about the eating habits of the common household pet) follows a gently twisting path that eventu-



John Kolvenbach



Loretta Greco directs the NewSCRipts staged reading of *Goldfish*.

ally ties all four of its characters in knots. We want Lucy and Albert's love to succeed: they deserve it. But we also come to understand that Leo and Emily, denied the lives they perhaps deserved, look to their children to fix their own broken hopes. What each of the four characters wants is reasonable; but their wants can't be reconciled in a way that will satisfy them all.

That's life — or a rendition of one small corner of it. Kolvenbach's fine eye for detail, his deft sense of humor and his delicate emotional colorings yield a rich depiction of experiences we all will likely recognize — probably from more than one perspective.