

Rebecca's Gamble - Defining Life and Death by Corina Roberts, Freelance performing arts reviewer

The verdict surprised me. In the land of the free and the home of the brave - and especially in Los Angeles - I expected something quite different.

Playwright Art Shulman's *Rebecca's Gamble* takes place in an Arizona court room. It asks of the audience to decide (literally) what the definition of life is.

In compelling arguments given by the prosecuting (Jerry Weil) and defense (Randy Vasquez) attorneys, we explore cryonics - the freezing of human bodies after death in the hope of reviving them when a cure has been found for the ailments they possessed - and when we are able to successfully reanimate the deceased.

Cryonics is real. Whether or not it is considered science, or moral, or remotely feasible, are issues of debate among doctors, scientists, clergy and ordinary people.

Dr. Rebecca Adler and her patient and friend, a young man and scientist dying of AIDS, made a bold decision. Before his body was completely ravaged by the disease, and while he was still of sound mind, he chose to receive a lethal doses of anesthesia, and have his body immediately preserved through cryonics, improving his chances of successful reanimation at a time in the future when a cure has been found for AIDS.

Witnesses for the prosecution passionately encourage us to understand that cryonics is not any more plausible than flying pigs or colonizing another galaxy. Clergy direct us to understand that God alone creates and takes away life.

Even the young man's grief-riddled mother (Diane Frank) testifies against Dr. Adler, despite having signed the memorandum of understanding acknowledging and accepting her son's decision; even knowing his death was imminent and inevitable.

If the play seems all too real, it's because it is co-written by Robert Begam, a prominent attorney and former President of the Association of Trial Lawyers of America (a 60,000 member association now known as the American Association for Justice). It is based on Begam's novel *Long Life?* and its main characters come to life in the court room drama in brilliant performances.

Director Rick Walters is no stranger to theatre. Directing since 1961, he has over 100 productions and an impressive list of well-known actors that he's coached on his resume. Walters allows the actors in *Rebecca's Gamble* creative freedom with their roles, and his method renders excellent results. The characters in the court room are passionate, articulate, colorful and engaging. Each of them brings the audience a different piece of the puzzle that is cryonics, and enlightens us about scientific advances that seem far-fetched; and yet, they are referring to real research, happening now.

Theatrecraft Playhouse boasts a central stage with a 360 degree view of the actors and the set. It is the perfect setting for this stage play, which draws you in from the moment the lights dim.

Rebecca's Gamble stretches our awareness. What is the definition of life? The answer becomes more and more complex if we are willing to consider all the evidence presented.

The role of Rebecca Adler is played by the talented Diane Linder...for better or for worse. Rebecca knows she is not a murderer, and she carries herself with dignity bordering on arrogance, poised on the brink of haughty red heels. Her confidence is sent reeling when witnesses for the defense confess that they were unaware of what Rebecca had done with her cryonics patient, and had they known, would have called the police.

It's a move by the defense designed to prove that these witnesses were not in the doctor's pocket...whether or not it translates that way to the audience is debatable.

Adler isn't looking to win the jury with sentiment or charm, but with the science of cryonics and the hope of a better future for all of mankind through science. The audience must judge based on these principles, because Adler's character is not one to beg for sympathy.

Ultimately, Adler's fate is decided at the end of each performance by a panel of jurors composed of audience members. If the drama in the court room wasn't real enough, the verdict is tallied from the juror's ballots at the end of the play and read by Judge Fox (the ever-phenomenal Henry Holden) in the dead-pan manner of a seasoned veteran judge at the end of a lengthy murder trial. Five people decide Rebecca's fate. Five people set a precedent for the future of a woman, and of science itself.

I was sure my understanding of the case, and all of its complexities, was accurate, reasonable, fair. When the ballots were examined and Judge Fox read the verdict, I was stunned.

Rebecca's Gamble is intense, extremely well written, and masterfully brought to life by a wonderful and talented cast. It's the kind of play you are still thinking about, and talking about, weeks after seeing it.

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