

Bridge opens up

Daniel MacIvor's excellent family drama still insightful

★★★★ (out of five)

Mere weeks after he figuratively burned all his bridges, Daniel MacIvor is building new ones.

But the man who closed the books on a two-decade association with da da kamera by reprising three of his most successful one-man shows on the stage of *Buddies In Bad Times* seems determined to build his new bridges both to the past and the future.

So it is that in his first post-da da endeavour, MacIvor tackles not some bright and shiny new work but rather a work created outside the da da envelope almost 10 years ago.

The work is titled *Marion Bridge*, and if the title sounds familiar, small wonder. After MacIvor wrote the play for a Nova Scotia-based theatre company, he spun it off into his first movie, a guise in which it enjoyed considerable success, as did the play itself.

Now, finally, the time has come for the play to make its Toronto debut under MacIvor's direction in a production that opened Saturday night at the Young Centre, a production of *The Company Theatre*. *Marion Bridge* runs there through May 26.

Named for a small town on Cape Breton Island, the work is apparently set in Sydney, in the dining room of the MacKeigan family, where three grown daughters have gathered to mark the incipient passing of their long-divorced mother.

Agnes, the eldest, played by Caroline Gillis, is a struggling actress who's come home from Toronto to join sisters Theresa (Sarah Dodd), a nun in a farming order and Louise (Emmy Alcorn), reprising the role she played in the movie), a lost sort who seems to be struggling to find a path of her own.

By John Coulbourn

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This being family, there is, of course, bad blood mixed in with the good – and the sisters waste little time in pleasantries before the bickering begins. At first, it is minor stuff – Agnes's drinking, Theresa's smug sense of moral superiority and Louise's fixation on junk TV – but slowly, as their mother slips away unseen in another room, the sisters return to the larger hurts of their shared childhood, in the process, discovering that shared experiences don't always add up to shared perceptions. Slowly they make their way to a point somewhere in *Marion Bridge* that is as much a rediscovery of their sisterhood as it is an ending to their childhood.

For those accustomed to the seedier side of MacIvor's theatrical world – a world often inhabited by dark and deranged souls – *Marion Bridge* is a walk on the gentler side of MacIvor, for while all of the sisters are clearly scarred by the hurts they've experienced, those scars have not destroyed any of their essential humanity. In a script rich in gently bitchy humour, MacIvor makes us glad of the opportunity to share their flawed lives.

But if the script is marked by the deft hand of an accomplished playwright, the production itself seems oddly tentative under MacIvor's direction. Working on John Thompson's self-consciously austere set – the dining room table that dominates an otherwise bare stage is surrounded by only three chairs, despite the fact that this has long been a four-member family – the cast never really seems completely at home in their surroundings in the way that siblings should.

Still, thanks to their skill and to a series of monologues with which MacIvor peppers an otherwise conventional narrative (and in which Dodd particularly shines) the familial portrait that emerges is more than enough to justify a trip to *Marion Bridge*.