

# In Troubled 'Daughter,' Performance Triumphs – Worth Seeing

By Michael J. Toscano  
Special to The Washington Post  
Thursday, November 6, 2008; VA08

Port City Playhouse opened a drama packed with political themes last weekend, just in time for Tuesday's election. It's gambling that audiences aren't so exhausted from the long campaign that they'll fail to show up for Wendy Wasserstein's "An American Daughter."

This drama, with some light moments, was written in 1997. But it still has relevant things to say about how we perceive women who operate at the national level of politics. It is far from Wasserstein's best writing, having lasted only 89 performances on Broadway. But Margaret Bush's work in the title role here makes it worth seeing.

Lyssa Dent-Hughes (Bush) is a nationally recognized doctor and women's health advocate. She is also a loving wife and mother and a Georgetown salon host. A classic Washington insider, she is the liberal daughter of a conservative U.S. senator and has just been nominated for surgeon general by the president. Can she juggle all these roles? She seems to think so, and things go smoothly until a minor, technical legal transgression is revealed. The resulting media and political firestorm endangers the nomination, even as betrayals affect her personal life.

Wasserstein is undisciplined here. She introduces so many elements that there is little chance to satisfyingly delve into all of them. There is the main theme of what we expect of women in national politics, and a variety of purely political issues are launched. The role of the media is a major subject of the play but barely considered. Wasserstein also lards on gay issues, the state of post-feminism, an unfulfilled friend with a biological clock that's loudly ticking and marital strains. It is an unsatisfying hodgepodge.

But Bush provides a startlingly lucid perspective, creating a woman who is clearheaded and self-assured. Her Lyssa is professionally fervent but personally open and accessible, and even sensual; she's a fully realized character. Bush's dexterity in layering character pays off. She plays Lyssa as a formidably powerful nominee, a credible feminist trailblazer. But Lyssa is trapped by rules that apply to women in her position. She must mitigate her power with some ill-defined image of femininity, to be America's daughter, in effect. Bush allows us to see the struggle Lyssa wages to achieve this balance, a range of subtle emotions playing over her face. It is a striking performance that significantly enhances this play.

Bush is ably supported by Mark Lee Adams, who plays her husband with a quietly unsettling mix of pride and resentment. Therese McNichol is sharply effective as Quincy Quince (a cartoonlike name apparently created for the sake of one off-color joke). She's a post-feminist vulture who profits from the wreckage of lives and political processes.

Cal Whitehurst adds bracing realism as TV journalist Timber Tucker (another cartoon name used for cheap jokes). Whitehurst not only affects the sonorous vocal patterns those with broadcasting backgrounds possess, but he adroitly negotiates the thin line between professional opportunism and treachery in a manner that clears up confusion over the character's role in the proceedings. A scene where Lyssa agrees to a prime-time TV interview with Tucker is particularly pungent, bringing to mind cable TV shouting head Chris Matthews's hectoring of Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton during the primaries this year. It underscores that not as much progress as we might like has been made in 11 years.

Smaller parts are well played, but director Barra Kahn allowed severe overacting in two major roles. Anita Jones, as Lyssa's friend Judith, utilizes the helicopter method of performance: Constantly whirl your arms about so people don't notice weak acting. Richard Isaacs is stridently discordant as family friend Morrow McCarthy.

We can't imagine why Lyssa and her husband would want this unpleasant guy around, and Isaacs's off-kilter performance confuses the character's responsibility in damaging his friend's nomination.

Slapdash set design and construction, along with lackluster lighting, undermine the required sense that Lyssa's living room is a bastion of comfort, educated good taste and affluence. But if you can take a last little bit of politics, Margaret Bush's performance is worth your time.

*"An American Daughter" continues through Nov. 16, performed by Port City Playhouse at the Lee Center for the Performing Arts, 1108 Jefferson St., Alexandria. Showtime Fridays, Saturdays and Tuesday is 8 p.m. There will be a Sunday matinee Nov. 16 at 3 p.m. For information and reservations, call 703-838-2880 or visit <http://www.portcityplayhouse.com>.*