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[October 28, 2009](#) > Theatre: Gingerbread Lady proves to be one strong cookie

Theatre: Gingerbread Lady proves to be one strong cookie



By Julie Grabowski

Known for such comedic gems as "Brighton Beach Memoirs," "Lost in Younkers," "Biloxi Blues," and "The Odd Couple," Neil Simon strays to the dark side in his 1970 play "The Gingerbread Lady" now playing at Chanticleers Theatre in Castro Valley.

Cabaret singer Evy Meara has returned home from a 10-week stay in a Long Island rehab center to restart her life and become a mature, responsible, alcohol-free person. She is welcomed by loyal friends Toby and Jimmy - a vain beauty queen and a gay out-of-work actor desperate to be a star, her adoring 17-year-old daughter Polly, and decade younger ex-lover Lou. Battling demons and doubt Evy makes a brave start, but when a double serving of devastating news crashes Toby's 40th birthday party, she begins to spiral out of control, putting her relationships and future in jeopardy.

The six-member cast is wonderfully adept and engaging under the direction of John Sellen, with the women the obvious powerhouses of the show, led by the flawless Rhonda Taylor. As the struggling, sharp-witted Evy, Taylor is dynamic and completely captivating. Shannon Hunt is strong and touching as the delightfully narcissistic Toby. Laura Morgan delivers presence and power as the forgiving and staunch Polly. John V. Burke and Reuben Alvear II display energy and passion in their roles and Antonio Urbina is winning as delivery boy Manuel.

While serious in subject matter "The Gingerbread Lady" is seasoned with so much comedic exchange that at times one can almost forget the severity of the situation. But the story shows humanity in all its flawed glory with the call to fight the good fight and be real people without the shields of alcohol, makeup, or star quality.

Though it runs a bit long, "The Gingerbread Lady" is an entertaining and engaging story definitely worth an evening out.

Tickets are \$16 general admission, and \$13 for seniors and students. For more information or to purchase tickets call (510) 733-5483 or visit www.chanticleers.org.

The Gingerbread Lady
 October 23-November 14
 Fridays and Saturdays 8 p.m., Sundays 2 p.m.
 Chanticleers Theatre
 3683 Quail Avenue, Castro Valley
 (510) 733-5483
www.chanticleers.org

Tickets: \$13-\$16

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