

Artificial intelligence invades Segal Centre

Arts Scene

by Heather Solomon

Ellen David's role as the mature daughter in the futuristic world of *Marjorie Prime*, which is playing at the Segal Centre in Montreal until March 18, hits closer to home than one might expect for a sci-fi drama.

The story, written by American playwright Jordan Harrison, is about a woman in her mid-80s with dementia, whose daughter and son-in-law take her in and arrange for a Prime – an intelligent hologram that's "primed" with the personality and stories of her late husband.

"My mom, who will be 91 this summer, is also plagued by dementia, so it's relatable. Then there's a male sibling that my character has, who is deceased, and that is also my case: my brother, David, passed away years ago," Ellen David says.

"The interesting thing is, the first two letters of their names are the same, David and Damian. David is not forgotten, as evidenced by my last name (which was formerly Cohen)," she says.

What is forgotten about someone's life and what is purposely retained and handed down are central themes in this play. It's also about what part of a person is left behind after he or she has passed on.

"Family stories get reinterpreted like in broken telephone. They change and evolve and, in the end, what do we remember?" says David.

How that affects the lives of David's character, Tess, and her husband, Jon, as

well as Tess's mother, Marjorie, and even the artificial intelligence (AI) named Walter Prime, moves the action forward.

"Really, it's about love and the challenges of loving people," says David.

She credits the direction of Lisa Rubin, the set by John Dinning, Louise Bourret's costumes, Tim Rodrigues's lighting and the music composed especially for the play by Christian Thomas, with allowing her to project herself into the play's setting in the year 2062.

In addition to conducting extensive table work at the outset, in which the actors discussed the play's issues and clarified details, Rubin also had them watch the first episode of *Black Mirror*'s second season, which deals with a widow's relationship with her husband's AI embodiment.

"Then John not only gave us the interior (where the performance takes place), but a sketch of what the exterior of the American East Coast house would look like, for us to see and imagine. Its round rooms symbolize the circle of life and eternity," says David.

"Christian composed themes for each character and the score is stunning. You can weep just from listening to his music."

Emotion is a tricky variable for the AI, which is played by Éloi Archambaudoin. "The actor has to be just blank enough, yet not broadcast that they are a machine," says David.

"Primes arrive with a certain amount of download, in terms of how the individual looked and how they walked and spoke, but the rest of it is an oral history, in the tradition of storytelling. Their knowledge expands exponentially. My



Ellen David

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character recognizes at one point that she can't resolve issues with a computer. It's a cautionary tale because if you've got issues to work out, you must do it with the individual while they're here."

And that's how this play demonstrates its relevance to today's world, where seniors' homes are already distributing robotic "comfort pets" to residents and the future is less than a step away from a

writer's imagination.

"The play was nominated for the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for drama and it leads to a lot of discussion, a lot of questions about what it is to be alive and what it is to be human," says David. "For an audience, it is a wonderful thing to experience." ■

Tickets are available by calling 514-739-7944, or visiting segalcentre.org.

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