

## Marjorie Prime



**By Jordon Harrison Ensemble Theatre  
Production & Noosa Alive! Director: Mitchell  
Butel. J Theatre, Noosa. Qld. 24-25 July 2018**

*Noosa Alive!*, or as it used to be known, *Noosa Long Weekend*, is the Sunshine Coast's celebration of Arts and Culture and has been a highlight of the area for a phenomenal 17 years. It's usually jam-packed with events and artists including premieres, and this year is no exception. In between the contemporary a-capella group *The Idea of North*, and Blake Bowden's Lorenz Hart tribute *Straight From the Hart*, there was Jordon Harrison's (*Orange is the New Black*) little gem of a play *Marjorie Prime*.

A Pulitzer Prize drama finalist in 2014, Harrison's play first opened at the Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles, before an acclaimed Broadway engagement at Playwrights Horizon in 2015. It comes to *Noosa Alive!* direct from its recent Australian Premiere season at the Ensemble Theatre, Sydney.

A futuristic piece set in 2062, Marjorie (Maggie Dence), a woman in her eighties is suffering from dementia which is placing a severe toll on her highly-strung daughter Tess (Lucy Bell) and her patient son-in-law Jon (Richard Sydenham) who are Marjorie's main carers. Jon decides to hire Senior Serenity, a company who provide holograph *Primes* designed to help in bringing comfort and company to the elderly with severe memory loss.

*Marjorie's Prime* is Walter (Jake Speer), a mid-thirties holographic image of her late husband who looks and acts like he was when she first met him and they fell in love. The fact that Marjorie has chosen a younger version of her husband and Tess' father, unsettles Tess, but Jon is adamant that the computerised companion is doing her good. Marjorie, a Vivaldi violin player in her youth, reminisces about the past with Walter and if she doesn't like the remembrance she's having she promptly fantasises and changes it. She prefers a scenario of a previous suitor as being a No. 2 seed tennis pro when in actual fact he was an amateur, or that Walter proposed to her after seeing a screening of *Casablanca* when it was really *My Best Friend's Wedding*. Marjorie also becomes a *Prime* for Tess, only in Tess' version of Marjorie she is an old woman just prior to her death; a fact that worries Tess that her most vivid memory of her mother is when she was old.

On an almost bare stage except for a couple of chairs, but with superb lighting, this flawless cast couldn't be better, and with equally flawless direction by Michel Butel, Harrison's concept of technology as a palliative tool is uncomfortably realistic.

Lucy Bell walks a tightrope as Tess, a compulsively loving daughter on one hand, but on the other snappily critical of the little things such as when her mother sings a snatch of Beyonce's pop "Single Ladies." Richard Sydenham's Jon is a stalwart of calm as he negotiates the stormy seas between both women, whilst Jake Speer's Walter is a charming and handsome swain.

But it is Maggie Dence's show. Her Marjorie is wilfully obtuse and forgetful, coquettishly seductive and witty, and above all human. It's an ineffable portrait of a woman on the cusp of senility.

Festival director Ian Mackellar is to be congratulated on bringing this piece of Off-Broadway to the Sunshine Coast. It was thought provoking, disturbing and potent drama.



*Peter Pinne*

Images from the Ensemble Theatre season by Lisa Tomasetti

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