

Two-woman play 'Collected Stories' is an acting triumph for its stars

By John Monaghan Detroit Free Press Special Writer Filed Under Entertainment Arts

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Katie Lietz, left, and Linda Rabin Hammel in Matrix Theatre Company's production of 'Collected Stories.' / Molly McMahon

'Collected Stories'

Three stars out of four stars 8 p.m. Fri.-Sat., 3 p.m. Sun.
Through March 16. Matrix Theatre Company 2730 Bagley,
Detroit 313-967-0599 www.matrixtheatre.org \$15-\$20

I have seen Linda Rabin Hammel in at least a dozen roles over the past decade, from long-suffering diplomat's wife in "M. Butterfly" to sinister kidnapper in "The Play About the Baby." None suited her personality and talents as well as Ruth, the celebrated writer and teacher who forges a complex relationship with one of her students in the excellent Matrix Theatre production of David

Margulies' "Collected Stories."

Diminutive, red-haired and flinty, Ruth has resided for more than 30 years in the same Manhattan apartment, earning fame as a short-fiction writer while also holding a teaching job at Columbia University. On rare occasions, she keeps office hours for students at her home, as she does for Lisa (Katie Lietz), whose stories she likes very much.

But Ruth isn't so sure about Lisa, who comes off as overly fawning and flighty. Why, Ruth wonders, do young women of Lisa's generation insist on phrasing declarative sentences with question marks? It is the first of many lessons that acolyte Lisa takes to heart.

Ruth is not always easy to get along with, as Lisa discovers when she becomes the writer's personal assistant and part-time secretary. Despite a few dustups over job duties, the two eventually build some camaraderie. Then things change sharply. Budding writer Lisa produces a successful novel, but the means by which she does so leaves Ruth feeling as if their friendship has been betrayed.

Fueled by Margulies' insightful script, the two-person drama relies heavily on the peculiar chemistry of the actresses. Lietz, in her Matrix debut, is up to the task of playing a young woman who grows from struggling student to published writer. When a New York Times reviewer calls Lisa an important voice of her generation, Ruth is supportive but also jealous because she won similar praise decades ago.

But as good as Lietz is, the play belongs to Hammel, who cagily taps into Ruth's toughness and vulnerability. She is hurt when Lisa hints that Ruth's reputation suffered because she never published a longer work, and she runs a gamut of emotions when she suspects that Lisa has simply been using their friendship to gather writing material.

One of the best things about "Collected Stories," directed here by Molly McMahon, is that it has no hero and no villain. Ruth is not simply an academic curmudgeon any more than Lisa is a young, thoughtless mercenary. The motivations behind both characters are ripe for interpretation. Pulitzer Prize winner

Margulies has created a work (one of the few) that shows the way that writers think and behave in relation to each other.

Economically staged and thoughtfully acted, "Collected Stories" is a show tailor-made for the tiny black-box Matrix space. Scenic and properties designer Kate Orr has created a cozy, somewhat cramped apartment set that Ruth inhabits the way she inhabits her floppy sweater. Almost immediately upon walking in, Lisa recognizes a specific window view or the Matisse print hanging over the couch described in some of Ruth's stories. Seeing this play on a cold afternoon or evening in March is the theater equivalent of curling up with a good book.