

The Portland Phoenix

On Stage: Maine playwright's 'Death Wings' reckons with the art of letting go



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Denise Poirier wears a set of wings during a scene from Bess Welden's "Death Wings" at the Theater Project in Brunswick, Maine, March 2023. (Photo credit: Phoebe Parker)

Before the start of “Death Wings,” by Bess Welden, we’re invited onstage to explore its set, which is also an installation — an interactive treasury of leavings, mazes and reckonings.

We’re encouraged to comb through suitcases filled with old postcards, maps, light meters, a red porcelain cardinal in a nest. To move through tall grasses in a labyrinth. To look closely at the feathers of handcrafted wings. And to write, on a strip of paper, a sentence from our life story.

Such are also the materials from which an aging artist and grandmother, known as Grand (Denise Poirier), has long crafted wings for the dying. But now we meet her during her own last hours alive. Now,

Grand must choose the sentences of her own life story. She must finish making her own wings.



Bess Welden's *Death Wings* at the Theater Project in Brunswick, ME March 2023

The culmination of Welden's larger project of community wing-making and conversations about the end of life, "Death Wings" is onstage now at The Theater Project in Brunswick [Edit: After the Phoenix went to print on April 4, the remaining dates of the Brunswick run of the show were canceled due to an illness in the cast], then at Freeport's Meetinghouse Arts from April 20-29 [Edit: These dates are still on]. Staged by René Goddess, Dana Legawiec and Welden, "Death Wings" is a deliciously lyrical, disarmingly whimsical paean to the art of letting go.

As Grand considers the sentences that tell her life, we watch key scenes enacted in poetically fragmented fashion, with the help of multiple media forms and an agile chorus (Erica Murphy, Dana Legawiec, Lyra Legawiec, Shannon Wade and Welden).

Through shadow puppets (and the transcendent use of an overhead projector), we see Grand "adopted by birds" as a child in Russian-occupied Budapest. Through bird masks, dance, clowning and song (accompanied by Janice O'Rourke on guitar and chimes), we experience the radical candor and storytelling with which Grand has raised her granddaughter Rachel (played as a pre-teen by Lyra Legawiec and as a young woman by Wade). As Grand remembers her life, the ensemble acts out inventories, newscasts, pregnancies, sleepovers and installments of "Daydahlia and Icaria" — Grand's reassembled, feminized myth of flight and loss.

As the show shifts between threads and modes, the ensemble does exceptional work with sound, movement and pacing. Early on, one ensemble member sings a quick scrap of lullaby, and then others join in at seeming random, building swiftly to a gorgeous polyphony as each actor ranges independently over the stage. Then there's a chime, a beat of silence and stillness, a movement announced. Then voices and movements rise and entwine all over again.

Such shifts are frequent, sometimes invigoratingly disorienting, and often funny. One chapter of the Daydahlia myth is acted out by young Rachel directing her sleepover friends, who cloak themselves in sleeping bags and hold flashlights to their faces as they recite. Then: "Ok, now everyone's a bird!" Rachel shouts, and lo, there comes the delight of a flock of pre-teen girls noodling bird sounds. In a "news clip" scene about adult Rachel going missing, a reporter intones, "This image went viral": and a screen lights up a shadow puppet silhouette of a winged woman flying away.

Some of the show's simplest moments of staging are also the most breathtaking. When young Grand (Murphy) visits her own dying father to go through his things and make his wings, the old man is represented by a wool suit jacket with white shirt cuffs, a hat and a pair of glasses, all held and wielded by the ensemble as a kind of ghostly puppet. When two actors each slipped an arm into a coat sleeve — lending Grand's father flesh-and-blood hands and thrillingly subtle gestures as he gripped the chair's arms or fingered a prayer shawl — I heard audible exhalations of awe from the audience.

As for Grand, Poirier's portrayal is rich with warmth and wry grace. Her Grand's wisdom is sensual and embodied; her supple movements suggest a sense of hard-won ease in her existence. Between Poirier, Legawiec and Wade, Grand and Rachel share an electric rapport. They engage and improvise the stories like co-conspirators — until Rachel emits a wonderfully mortified shriek of “Grand!” when the conversation turns to anything sexual. Legawiec and Wade both do fine work in conveying Rachel's contrasting youth, her flights of rage or giddiness, her impatience to invent her own wings.

The production runs for an hour and 40 minutes without an intermission, which is a bit long, but its eclectic forms and its expert pacing keep it from feeling long until near the end. In the final scenes, when the pace slows a little and the song's lyrics become longer and more on-the-nose, I longed for a little more of the early scenes' prismatic rush.

But overwhelmingly, “Death Wings” is a show that surprises, delights and moves. Not only imaginative and wise, the show is also resourceful, making art of sundry leavings and ideas — feathers and old Time magazines; myth and memory; paper and grasses and shears.

Like Grand herself — and like a good death, perhaps — “Death Wings” makes use of everything, takes it apart and ingeniously reassembles it, and then finally, exhilaratingly, lets it all fall away.

Megan Grumbling is a writer, editor, and teacher who lives in Portland. Find her at megangrumbling.com.



“Death Wings,” by Bess Welden; music by Janice O’Rourke; staged by René Goddess, Dana Legawiec; and Bess Welden; with installation by Meg Anderson, Emilia McGrath, Rachel Taylor, Shannon Wade, and Michaela Wirth | April 20-29 at Meetinghouse Arts, 40 Main St., Freeport | www.deathwingsproject.org.

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