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BOTANIC GARDEN

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After the loss of a loved one many have the benefit of a close friend or good psychotherapist to help them move on. Few can claim to have the literal ghost of their deceased partner prodding them to "start over." But such is the scenario behind playwright Todd Logan's "Botanic Garden," a world premiere for Victory Gardens directed by Academy-Award winner Olympia Dukakis. Technically, this device is hardly new: two seasons ago writer Noah Haidle's "Vigils" at the Goodman also used the quirky conceit of a widow facing the daunting task of a re-entering the dating world after a cathartic trip down memory lane accompanied by the ghost of her lost husband. But unlike Haidle, who ultimately served up a metaphysical comedy, Logan gets a lot of dramatic mileage out of "Botanic Garden"'s flashbacks that clinically dissect marriage's familiar milestones: empty-nest syndrome, potential adultery, emotional calcification and the loss of sexual spark. At various points I was reminded of Bergman's "Scenes from a Marriage," the debt to Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" (in the vignettes where an unseen child is the catalyst for a terrible fight) and the sense of marital misery a la Strindberg. But these names will mean nothing to the average theatergoer, so it must be said that what will give "Botanic Garden" its universal appeal--a woman in the front row was wiping away tears on opening night--as well as its long life in the regional circuit, is Logan's accessible and unpretentious writing and the piece's semblance of intellectually deep material when, in fact, its recognizable relationship issues and universal themes on grief and mourning ring true and encourage comfortable post-show debates and discussion over a glass of wine or a late dinner, which is possible given "Botanic Garden"'s intermission-less seventy-minute length, another crowd-pleasing fact to be sure. Dukakis' light directorial touch--perfect for this subtle two-hander--allows stars Carmen Roman and James Leaming, married in real life, to exploit their shared sense of emotional and psychological intimacy for the benefit of the viewer, the cumulative effect of which is a sometimes hilarious, deeply satisfying and always entertaining evening at the theater.