

It Doesn't Get More Real Than This

By Ben Jacques

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Stoneham Theatre's premier performance of "Luna Gale" ended on Sunday, but the reverberations are still being felt around town.

Thursday, after a standing ovation for the cast, two dozen guests stayed for a "talk back" with members of Stoneham's Substance Abuse Coalition and the actors themselves.

I, for one, was stunned by the performance. The actors, led by Paula Plum, who played the social worker, Caroline, led a cast of two young adults addicted to drugs, a grandmother, pastor, a child services supervisor, and an 18-year-old woman raised in foster care headed for college.

They played their roles to perfection—the slumber of the addicted father, the shaking leg under the table of the addicted mother. The frustration of the social worker, the religious zeal of the grandmother, the clipped denial of the college student, the self-righteousness of the evangelical pastor. All the while: anger, fatigue and sorrow as they struggle to save each other and the most vulnerable of them all, the baby Luna Gale.

The play, created by Rebecca Gilman, avoided easy answers, revealing layers of complex history and emotion that left us, in our discussion afterward, reaching out for answers.

The story is about two young people in love, debilitated by methamphetamines, trying to care for their baby daughter in a filthy apartment.

When they show up at the emergency room with a sick child, Social Services steps in, takes the baby, and lays out a treatment plan for the parents. If they get well, they can apply to get their daughter back.

Meanwhile, the grandmother is awarded child custody, and the social worker tries to get the parents into treatment, counseling and Narcotics Anonymous.

But there are no treatment beds available, and although the parents go to counseling and begin to clean up their lives, the mother stumbles.

More issues and problems surface within social services, and in the grandmother's denial of family history. A long-squelched secret of abuse adds another excruciating layer to their lives.

After the play, audience members queried the actors about their roles, and coalition members about what is being done in Stoneham today.

Coalition chairperson Shelly MacNeill and others talked about multi-faceted measures locally and statewide in education, prevention, and treatment. She also credited the Youth Coalition, Stoneham high school students working to spread awareness and support.

A key theme was removing the stigma clothing drug and alcohol abuse, the need to bring addiction out of the shadows.

Was there hope in the Luna Gale story? Yes, but there was also much loss.

As we—caregivers, parents, teachers, first responders, and recovering addicts—pool our knowledge, experience and concerns, we can help make that hope grow.