

## Review: 'Better' @ Bridge Street Theatre, 9/13/19

By Steve Barnes

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Photo: John Sowle, Bridge Street Theatre  
Montana Lampert Hoover and Eric Fleising in the world premiere of "Better" at Bridge Street Theatre in Catskill. (BST publicity photo by John Sowle.)

CATSKILL – The title may be "Better," but the adjective that more closely applies to Bridge Street Theatre's world-premiere production of Michelle Carter's new play is "best."

Carter, an established playwright who is a creative-writing professor in San Francisco, had an earlier play, "How to Pray," staged by BST two years ago, and while it was of high quality, in writing and production, Carter and the Bridge Street creative team have delivered an altogether higher level of accomplishment with this new work. Superbly acted and directed, the play is nuanced, compelling and insightful, and if the world is fair at all, it will have a long life of future productions.

While "Better" does not defy description, most of the conventional ways in which one would explain what it's about seem imprecise or insufficient. Yes, it's an often richly funny drama about a family recovering from a tragedy. Yes, part of that recovery involves family members trying to find answers for what happened in an effort to understand themselves and rebuild their lives. And yes, it looks at the fallout from the hot-button issue of a mass shooting.

Each of those descriptions, however, requires a "but" and an amplification to be true to the individuals Carter has created and the world she's built around them. Each time you make a common assumption about what you think will happen, Carter finds a different, more original and satisfying way to explore her themes.

At the center of the story is 20-year-old Emily (the outstanding Montana Lampert Hoover), a star biology student at the Alabama university where her scientist mother was a professor. As the play opens, we learn that the mother, after being denied tenure, recently shot multiple people in her department. (Carter took inspiration from a real 2010 incident with similar details.)

Hoover makes Emily a practical, self-controlled young woman, one who recognizes the magnitude of the tragedy but doesn't fully grasp the degree to which her family will be ostracized as a result, or why. Forced to drop out because her scholarship is canceled, Emily begins working at a fondue restaurant and consults a medium (the very funny and compassionate Lori Evans) to try to contact a beloved mentor who was killed. Meanwhile, she navigates a new romance with a fellow student (Eric Fleising, excellent) and has ongoing negotiations with her father (Brian Linden, beautifully balancing grief and ongoing parental responsibilities) about managing their care of her much younger siblings, who, like their mother, are never seen.

Most importantly, she confronts herself, trying to assess what it means to be her mother's daughter – to share genetic material, a mind for science and a capacity for dynamic anger with a woman who committed a monstrous crime. In an extraordinary acting moment for Hoover, Emily articulates the biggest question she'd like answered by her mother: "Does whatever makes you you make me me?"

Working on an open set (by BST co-founder John Sowle, who also did the lighting) with elements that suggest the design of chemical bonds and DNA strands, the cast easily moves among multiple locations with the addition of a simple pieces of furniture: a workbench for the basement where the father retreats to putter on projects, a dining table for the restaurant, a chair for the medium's office, a box that functions as seating and as headboard for the bedroom where Emily and her classmate have one of the most touching, funny and original sexual explorations between awkward virgins that I've ever seen on stage.

Sara Lampert Hoover – mother of the lead cast member and director of "Frankie and Johnny in the Claire de Lune" at Bridge Street last year – guides her cast through the intermissionless 90 minutes and 17 scenes with assurance, bringing unerring nuance to moments of humor, anger and anguish. "Better" is a play about relationships, family, tragedy and resilience, all of which sounds like standard stuff to address. But – and, again, that word is necessary here – you've never seen it done like this before.

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