

The Berkshire Eagle

REVIEW: At Bridge Street Theatre, 'Griswold' is a 'buoyant exercise in the art of theater and storytelling'

[Jeffrey Borak](#)

Jeffrey Borak is The Eagle's theater critic.



From left, Leyla Modirzadeh, Andre G. Brown and Margo Whitcomb in a scene from "Griswold" at Bridge Street Theatre.

CATSKILL, N.Y. — On June 7, 1965, the United States Supreme Court, in a 7-2 decision, upheld the freedom of married couples to use contraceptives without government restriction or intervention. The landmark ruling in *Estelle T. Buxton and C. Lee Buxton v. Connecticut* struck down Connecticut's 1879 "Little Comstock Act," which, in effect, banned women's contraception in the state.

The Supreme Court's ruling was the final step in a hard-won battle that came after two previously unsuccessful challenges to Connecticut's law. Leading the legal charge was Estelle Griswold, executive director of the Planned Parenthood League of Connecticut. Joining her was Yale School of Medicine gynecologist C. Lee Buxton.

Griswold's battle drives a theatrically dynamic and stimulating new play, "Griswold," by Angela J. Davis, which is having its first fully produced showing at [Bridge Street Theatre](#), where it runs through Sunday.

"Griswold" covers a great deal of territory — nothing less than the history of the fight to eliminate a misguided, misinformed state law and legalize women's contraception. Davis' narrative also folds in Griswold's own story about a woman in her early 20s; an activist in her 60s; and the wife of 39 years of an insurance salesman who died in 1966.

As played by Margo Whitcomb in a commanding and vibrant performance, Estelle Griswold, who died in August 1981 at the age of 81, emerges as a feisty, slyly witty, observant, smart, determined activist. She was the third of three children. She had two older brothers, one of whom died before she was born; the other died one week before her third birthday. In December 1945, at the age of 45, she went to work with the United Nations Relief and Resettlement Association, doing whatever was necessary, she says, to provide care for refugees of World War II.

She worked for a time for the Connecticut Civil Rights Commission.

"I was their director; volunteer director," she says; "working for a 'moral imperative.'"

At the age of 60, she left the commission and went to work for Planned Parenthood and became its executive director, a salaried position this time. An expert fundraiser, Griswold launched a program that enabled Connecticut women to travel to neighboring Rhode Island or New York, where contraception was legal.

“We make appointments, and we pay for gasoline and toll roads when we drive ... women to doctors who aren’t gagged by laws invented by a man [late-19th century circus impresario P.T. Barnum who, as a Connecticut state legislator, drafted and introduced the Little Comstock Act in 1879] who forced live animals to jump through hoops of fire.

“... I had in mind about three times a week. ... And for women who want to drive themselves, we print up handy little flyers with maps and directions.”

So-called border runs to Rhode Island and the Westchester County communities of Mount Kisco and Port Chester in New York became what Griswold calls “core operations” for PPLC in the early 1960s. Eventually, PPLC opened its own law-defying clinics.

Whitcomb is not alone in relating Griswold’s story. She is more than ably joined by a talented and resourceful duo — Leyla Modirzadeh and Andre G. Brown who, between them, play 23 characters with deftly applied whimsy, skill and, in the case of Brown's portrayal of a young Texas man named Tyrone, wrenching power.

“Griswold” is far from an academic exercise. In its telling at Bridge Street Theatre, Davis’ play is a buoyant exercise in the art of theater and storytelling, in the full imaginative engagement of mind and matter.