

Review: Lighthouse keeper confronts loneliness, and more, in Alameda

Sam Hurwitt, Correspondent

As many people who've lived through the last couple of years could attest, solitude plays tricks on the brain.

That certainly seems to be the case for the lighthouse keeper Caretta in the latest original outdoor play by We Players. Day after day she clings to routine, saying and doing the same things with slight variations. And all the time the cracks in her composure grow, much like the crack in the wall she keeps trying to fix.

Conceived and performed by artistic director Ava Roy and created by Roy and Britt Lauer, "The Keeper" has the surreal air of a folk tale. Every day Caretta leaves items on her windowsill for an unknown neighbor that almost certainly is not a human being. Every morning she looks through her periscope and bids a fond farewell to some similarly obscure beloved. (Maybe the Moon?) She recites lines from the same Sylvia Plath poem while mending different things each day, and every night she reads bits of "Moby Dick" from a shelf full of different editions of the same book.

Almost every action is punctuated by ritualized rhymes and motions that are largely the same each day. That's not to say that there isn't enough variation to keep things interesting or that the show doesn't progress, but it's in that sense of relentless repetition and routine that we see her morale deteriorate, and much of the humor comes from the insertion of the unexpected.

We Players specialize in creating site-specific theater in evocative, usually outdoor settings. This one is performed at Alameda Point, nestled in the parking lot of boarded-up building with broken windows in part of the former Alameda Naval Air Station, and Roy's voice sometime echoes off of the surrounding buildings. It's also quite windy, and attendees are advised to bring layers.

In a departure from past shows' reliance on picturesque outdoor settings as their scenery, however, this show has a much more elaborate set on a mobile stage designed by Susan McComb and JD Durst. Some of it looks like a cozy shack with a wide variety of props that make up Caretta's daily busywork. On the roof is a chimney-like tower with many silver pinwheels that stands in for the light that she tends.

A mounted tear-off calendar reads "Sunday" and lists one task that becomes the centerpiece of her day. Every day holds a different chore, but every day is Sunday.

Playful and energetic but close to crumbling in solitude, Caretta is always talking to herself, whether she's reciting the things she says every day (such as "Nighttime belongs to the lighthouse" before she drops off to sleep) or comforting herself, cautioning herself, or otherwise talking herself down from the edge of despair. She keeps up a steady stream of literary quotations, poetry, nursery rhymes, word association and aphorisms.

Between all that and the unseen things outside that she talks to, she's not really alone, because she's filled her world with herself and her rituals. In the same way, Roy fills the stage all by herself with Caretta's constant activity.

While there are hints of an emotional arc, it would be hard to articulate anything approaching a plot in the play. Most things that are mysterious about Caretta's world and her routine don't get any less mysterious by the end than they were at the beginning. If anything, they only become more so.

Like Caretta's daily routine, the show feels more about the ritual and the feeling it gives than about the sense it makes or where if anywhere the story is going. As Caretta says every time she returns from tending the light up above, it's "not to illuminate, but to signal."

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'THE KEEPER'

By Ava Roy and Britt Lauer, presented by We Players

Through: June 26

Where: Alameda Point, Alameda

Running time: 90 minutes, no intermission

Tickets: \$20-\$60; www.weplayers.org