

THEATER REVIEW

Elderly Characters Looking Backward, and Forward, in 'Evensong'

By ANITA GATES

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The six actors make their entrances slowly, uncertainly. Some shuffle, some are hunched over, and some have trouble getting onto the stools that they will occupy (often changing places, in musical chairs fashion) during Mary Gage's "Evensong," now at TBG Arts Center. The characters' ages range from 80 to 101. (Most of the actors look younger.)

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Emily Pepper

Pat Nesbit, surrounded by other aging men and women in "Evensong."

Gwen (Lucille Patton) begins to talk animatedly about growing up as the daughter of a plantation manager in Jamaica. Helen (Mikel Sarah Lambert) remembers being spanked by her father when she was growing up well-to-do near Detroit, where she went periodically for shopping sprees.

Duke (Arthur French), the only African-American character, grew up in Detroit, but what he remembers is not knowing where his next meal would come from.

Readers' Opinions

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The content of Ms. Gage's rewarding, well-structured play is unexpected. Based on interviews she did with Americans 80 and older, it could have easily focused on the difficulties

of old age or the prospect of facing one's mortality. But "Evensong" is about these men's and women's lives, pure and simple.

Speaking in turn, and sometimes in unison when experiences overlap, the characters remember their pasts.

Gwen goes off to study in Leipzig, Germany, but misses horseback riding, poor thing. Duke wants to become a doctor, but that takes money, so he apprentices with a barber. Clay (Donald Grody), who grew up on a farm, meets Betty, clearly the love of his life.

The plain-spoken Sue (Pat Nesbit) stabs her husband in self-defense. Marie (Mary Ellen Ashley), a Romanian immigrant, gives birth to two "blue babies" (born with cyanosis) who die, but she goes on to have 13 children.

One person's family business goes bankrupt. Another is cheated in business by an old, trusted friend. Relatives die in World War II. One person, whose life had seemed very limited, goes to college and travels around the world.

The characters represent as much diversity of human experience as any group of six 30-year-olds would. And their pasts are as much a part of them as their futures, which is a valuable reminder never to define the elderly by their age.

"Evensong" runs through Aug. 27 at TBG Arts Center, 312 West 36th Street, Manhattan; (212) 352-3101.