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“LUCIA BERLIN: STORIES”–A DARK, RICH WORLD, AT WORD FOR WORD, S.F.

📅 February 19, 2018 ([Http://Theatrius.Com/2018/02/19/Lucia-Berlin-Stories-A-Dark-Rich-World-At-Word-For-Word-S-F/](http://Theatrius.Com/2018/02/19/Lucia-Berlin-Stories-A-Dark-Rich-World-At-Word-For-Word-S-F/)) 👤 Kim Waldron
([Http://Theatrius.Com/Author/Kwaldron/](http://Theatrius.Com/Author/Kwaldron/))

A Spellbinding Journey, Unadulterated and Moving

by Kim Waldron

Ominous jazz music hints at danger, vaguely threatening figures creep in, bent over, shadowy, in a parade choreographed for menace not beauty. A woman asleep in the foreground wakes up, disoriented, then recognizes her surroundings: Detox Ward.

She, Carlotta (sardonic Jeri Lynn Cohen), proceeds to describe the Detox experience, honestly, brutally, hilariously. Since she is the only woman in the Detox Ward, Carlotta inspires gallantry. All the patients get Nembutal at night, so that's something to look forward to, daily.



Delia MacDougall, Indiia Wilmott, Ryan Williams French, Phil Wong, Gendell Hernández, Cassidy Brown.
“Code Blue.” Photos by Julie Schuchard

Z Space and Word for Word present five of Lucia Berlin’s short stories from *A Manual for Cleaning Women*, chronicling a woman’s chronic alcoholism and eventual recovery. Like Berlin’s well-known stories of low-wage women’s work, it’s a brutal, intense realm. Berlin’s honesty, humor and vivid characters make a spellbinding world.

Cohen also plays Emergency Room clerk Lucille, who offers pointed comments about good versus bad suicides. Cohen also plays Mrs. Bevins, battling desperately to hold it together as a drunken mother of four. Later, she builds a sober life in Boulder, Colorado, and finally, teaches writing in a Los Angeles County jail to addicts and alcoholics. You don’t need to be an English major to figure out all these women are Lucia. After her death, one of Berlin’s sons said, “Ma wrote true stories, not necessarily autobiographical, but close enough for horseshoes.”



Indiia Wilmott and Gendell Hernández. Marlene tells off Zeff.

Seven ensemble actors ably bring her worlds to life; each playing many roles. Indiia Wilmott's magnificently awful Migraine Marlene brings down the house; I just pray I am never behind Marlene in an ER line. Wilmott shocks us, later, with her portrayal of young women inmates who reveal the cruelties they survived.

Cassidy Brown nails the sympathetic Chaz, a burnt-out hippie inmate, who describes a writing class in jail. Gendell Hernández ably plays winos and a prisoner turned bookworm, but it's his scene-stealing housecat I won't forget.



Ryan Williams French plays CD, a handsome young inmate doomed by gang warfare, who breaks our hearts. Delia MacDougall's unashamed Dixie, a woman who patiently waits to return to her life of crime, is a stand out.

Phil Wong has a wide reach: he plays honest, patient Officer Wong of the Oakland Police; an ailing Chinese matriarch Mme Y; and a Trans inmate. I love Officer Wong, it's good to be reminded cops like him exist.



Jeri Lynn Cohen "contemplating alcohol."

Berlin's drunks are complete human beings, so it's no surprise that Norman Gee's sympathetic drunk sticks with me. Even more than Charles Bukowski, Lucia Berlin shows the camaraderie among street rummies. Despite the disorder in their lives, their world includes warmth and humanity. They prove worthy of respect.

San Francisco's own Marcus Shelby, composer and bassist, composed a wonderful score to accompany these stories, well worthy of this fine production.

I saw "Lucia Berlin: Stories" with a friend who announced, passionately, she enjoyed the show. When she said nothing more, I asked, "Why?" She thought a moment, puzzled herself, and then decided, "She's authentic."

Amen.



Norman Gee doing the commuter crossword.

“**Lucia Berlin: Stories**” by **Lucia Berlin**, directed by **Nancy Shelby & Joanne Winter**, at **Z Space** and **Word for Word** , San Francisco, through Sunday, March 11. 2018. **Info:** [zspace.org \(http://www.zspace.org/storiesbyluciaberlin\)](http://www.zspace.org/storiesbyluciaberlin)

Cast: **Cassidy Brown**, **Jeri Lynn Cohen**, **Ryan Williams French**, **Normal Gee**, **Gendell Hernández**, **Delia MacDougall**, **India Wilmott**, and **Phil Wong**.

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