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“SHIPMENT DAY” RECALLS PAINFUL ERA IN HAWAII HISTORY

Review by John Berger



Olivia Robello was diagnosed with leprosy at 18 — incurable and believed to be highly contagious in 1934. She was held involuntarily for more than two years at Kalihi Hospital and then shipped to Kalaupapa on Molokai doomed to live out her life in quarantine.

Olivia ultimately survived the disease, met John Breitha in Kalaupapa and married him, and lived to see effective treatments for leprosy — also known as Hansen’s disease — become available. Cured of the disease but marked for life by its physical ravages, she chose to make Kalaupapa her home while also traveling extensively and became an active advocate for Hawaii’s surviving Hansen’s disease patients.

As the play begins we see 18-year-old Olivia Robello lose her home, her family, her freedom, her future and the fiancé who adored her. That is the story that playwright/director Lorenzo DeStefano and a consistently talented cast bring to life with memorable success with “**Shipment Day**” this month at Manoa Valley Theatre.

Ku‘ulei Shafee (Olivia) quickly wins our sympathy as Olivia recounts key moments of her childhood, her relationship with her loving parents, the cautious romantic connection with her fiancé — and the traumatic events of her arrest and confinement. We watch as Olivia is treated like a laboratory specimen rather than as a person. Subjected to one dehumanizing indignity after another, she rebels in whatever small ways are open to her. Eventually, Olivia finds kindred spirits in two of her fellow detained patients.



Ku‘ulei Shafee, front, stars as Olivia Robello, and William Ha‘o and Karen Kaulana as her parents in Manoa Valley Theatre’s production of “Shipment Day.”

Hawaii stage veterans William Ha‘o (Manuel Robello) and Karen Kaulana (Mary Fernandez Robello) are strong presences as Olivia’s loving but conflicted parents. Mary goes to visit Olivia in the prison-like hospital and lovingly sticks her fingers through the wire mesh that is intended to prevent physical contact between patients and visitors. Manuel, who feels the weight of their neighbors’ ostracism more heavily, does not visit Olivia, but he threatens violence when he thinks the Board of Health is harassing the other members of his family.

Maleko McDonnell (Les Teixeira) touches the heart as the hapless fiancé who returns from the mainland with expectations of marriage only to search in vain for Olivia and her family. (Olivia never wrote to tell him where she was. When her family was forced out of their Kalihi neighborhood, they left no forwarding address.) McDonnell conveys the tragedy so compellingly that Teixeira’s fate becomes the unsolved romantic mystery of the story.

Denise Aiko Chinen (Betty) and Lauren Murata (Linda) do great work with Shafee in a scene where Olivia and two friends sneak out of the hospital for a night on the town and get picked up by three sailors — McDonnell (Joe), Richard Bragdon (Carl) and David Heulitt (Hank). The sailors’ stereotypical Southern accents are annoying, but the scene develops into the dramatic cliffhanger of DeStefano’s beautifully staged look at a painful era in island history.

Shipment Day Productions

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