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## Toxic Memories of Vietnam Whip Up 'Orange Julius' at Moxie

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A scene from 'Orange Julius' at Moxie Theatre.

By Pat Launer

Orange Julius is a sweet, frothy drink. It's also one particular Vietnam veteran, a victim of exposure to the toxic herbicide Agent Orange.

And one more thing. "Orange Julius" is an episodic memory play by Basil Kreimendahl, now having its world premiere at Moxie Theatre.

Nut is looking back on her life with her father, remembering snippets of conversations, things not said or done. She also imagines him in Vietnam, with herself as one of his tough-as-nails comrades. It was there that they experienced Agent Orange which, over the years, was to attack his mind and his body in various awful ways, rendering him weak, cancer-ridden, hallucinatory and at times, catatonic.

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In her youth, she watched too many after-school specials, and has let them influence her. When she was “9 or 10,” her parents separated for a while, and she didn’t see her father for a year; when he came back for a visit, she was afraid he was going to kidnap her. One time, when he put his hand on her knee in the car, she worried that his physical contact may have been “inappropriate.”

Nut is still trying to figure out her place in the world, vis-à-vis her father, and herself. She identifies fluidly, as “gender queer,” the playwright has said. She dresses in combat fatigues. In her fantasy, her father was often frightened of the war. He claimed to want a nice, cool Orange Julius as soon as he got home — but even he after he was discharged, he couldn’t bear to leave his buddies — including Nut.

This whole series of jagged, fleeting memories is Nut’s effort to understand her father, to re-connect with him, to re-live some of their experiences and maybe play them out more effectively. She has a mother and a sister — even a brother who never appears and whom her father doesn’t even remember when he’s interviewed on video too late in his foreshortened life. There are stories of grandparents and addictions (hers, too) and an imagined fellow soldier. But they’re all peripheral. This is Nut’s story, her memories, her effort of make sense of her father’s actions and her own, to solidify her identity and be able to move on.

The Moxie Theatre performance I attended was received in a serious, somber way. But I was told that at other show dates, the audience laughed freely and frequently. Either way, under the meticulous, choreographed direction of New York-based guest director Will Davis, this is an intriguing, gut-wrenching, enigmatic but thought-provoking play. It’s also repetitive at times (those Vietnam sequences do go on... again and again), and the intermission-less 80 minutes can drag. It’s new and it’s short, but it still needs tightening.

The cast is superlative, from Dana Case’s tight-lipped, taciturn mother to Wendy Maples’ jocular sister, to last-minute addition Steve Froelich, thoroughly convincing as the F-bomb-spewing macho warrior. As Julius, Jeffrey Jones is, as has come to be expected, a mesmerizing presence, whether he’s expressing his fear in battle, his love of fishing — or he’s trapped in a glassy-eyed stasis.

At the center of it all is Rae K. Henderson, intense, authoritative, casual and completely in command as the confused, contrite, guilt-ridden Nut, whose recollections come in out-of-sequence fits and starts, toting up to a lifetime of fragments that haven’t gelled into a satisfying whole for her.

Julius’ decline and death were painful for both of them, for all of them. Nut keeps trying to make sense of something that made no sense at all.

Eerily, those Agent Orange ‘drops’ are beautifully realized as feathers falling from the sky (scenic design by Victoria Petrovich). The sound (Emily Jankowski) and light (Jason Bieber) contribute to the sense of porous boundary between the real and the imagined.

There’s a lot to contemplate in this new work, on personal and political levels. And maybe, the night you see it, there’ll be laughter to wash down the heartache.

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- **“Orange Julius”** runs through Oct. 18, at Moxie Theatre at 6663 El Cajon Blvd. near San Diego State University
  - Performances are Thursday at 7 p.m., Friday-Saturday at 8 p.m., Sunday at 2 p.m. There will be a Q&A with the actors after the performance on Oct. 4
  - Running Time: 80 min.
  - Tickets (\$25-\$30) are at 858-598-7620 or online at [www.moxietheatre.com](http://www.moxietheatre.com)
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*Pat Launer is a long-time San Diego arts writer and an Emmy Award-winning theater critic. An archive of her previews and reviews can be found*

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