

# From Maytag to Macbeth in Women's Voices Festival: Can't complain

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By [Nelson Pressley](#)

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Small talk looms large in three intimate shows playing as part of the Women's Voices Theater Festival. A grown woman deals with her hospitalized mother in Christine Evans's imaginative "Can't Complain"; an actor messes with an actress's mind during the offstage chitchat of Monique LaForce's one-act "Hootenanny"; and Audrey Cefaly has penned an old-fashioned slow-burn romance in "Maytag Virgin."

"Hootenanny" has the lightest weight. This 45-minute diversion for two performers, directed without frills by Catherine Aselford, finds an actor (Doug Krehbel) semi-stalking an attractive actress (Cate Brewer). They're killing time backstage during a bluegrass version of "Macbeth," so it's no surprise that the theme of their little discussion turns to power.

The actress craves a lucrative television role. As they run lines for her audition, can the actor help her as much as Lady Macbeth, um, "helps" her husband?

There's a bit of recorded bluegrass from Dead Man's Hollow underneath this Guillotine Theatre production, which is at the National Museum of Women in the Arts this weekend before migrating to the Receiving Vault at Ivy Hill Cemetery for two final shows. (The show's promotional material suggests the band will play live, so these brief recordings play a disappointingly minor role.) The short story twist at the end is okay, but even with "Macbeth" references, the playlet feels awfully slender on its own.

Cefaly's two-hander "Maytag Virgin" (at the Writer's Center in Bethesda) has an enjoyable slow-poke style for most of its two-plus hours. The setting is Alabama, where a handsome widower moves next door to a drawling young widow. No suspense about what will happen, yet Cefaly, who also directs this confident, relaxed show for the Quotidian Theatre Company, makes her characters rich and mixed-up enough for us to build some real affection for them.

It's so throwback that I actually thought of Henry Fonda's laconic cadences as the understated, cool William Hardy played Jack Key, while Gillian Shelly played Elizabeth Nash like a curvy,

antsy Holly Hunter. Lizzie, as Jack calls her, thinks her “sex goddess” days are past and her figure’s gone. Mr. Key, as Lizzie calls Jack, thinks she’s lovely and finds her spunky nature fetching.

That’s all she wrote: You can fill it in from there. The only flaw is that Cefaly hasn’t quite figured out how to end it. The play talks itself out too far, and the characters, both teachers, start telling each other things we already know about them. Still, it’s sweet stuff, if you have a taste for that sort of moonshine.

“Can’t Complain” shapes up as the most accomplished show I’ve seen at Spooky Action Theater, which operates out of a church basement at 16th and S streets NW. Evans has written a surreal comedy in which Maureen (an amusingly animated Tonya Beckman) chafes at her mother’s neediness and slights. Cornelia Hart plays Maureen’s mother, Rita, with an air of innocence that infuriates Maureen but also is understandable, since Rita has just had a stroke that has loosened the bolts in her brain.

Under Michael Bloom’s direction, the acting has enjoyable flair. Nicole Ruthmarie brings aplomb to the dual roles of an African American orderly named Lorraine and Maureen’s mixed-race daughter Jansis, and Wendy Wilmer does tangy, mischievous work as an ancient Irish woman named Iris who seems to materialize straight up from inside a hospital mattress. There are sly, poetic tricks in Luciana Stecconi’s set, a sterile hospital room that allows for the magical comings and goings of Evans’s funny-hostile script. There’s plenty of blarney and aggrieved venting in this lively play, but it comes down to a painful, personal mother-daughter reckoning, handled with grace.

IF YOU GO

## Can’t Complain

Spooky Action Theater, 1810  
16th St. NW. 202-248-0301. [www.spookyaction.org](http://www.spookyaction.org).

**Dates:** Through Oct. 25.

**Prices:** \$15-\$35.

Maytag Virgin

The Writer's Center, 4508 Walsh St., Bethesda. 800-838-3006.

[www.brownpapertickets.com](http://www.brownpapertickets.com).

**Dates:** Through Nov. 1.

**Prices:** \$15-\$30.

Hootenanny

National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1250 New York Ave. NW (Oct. 10 and 11) and the Receiving Vault at Ivy Hill Cemetery, 2823 Kings Cloister Cir., Alexandria (Oct. 17 and 18). [www.brownpapertickets.com](http://www.brownpapertickets.com).

**Dates:** Saturday, Sunday, Oct. 17 and 18.

**Prices:** \$25.

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### **Nelson Pressley**

Nelson Pressley has covered theater for The Washington Post since 1999. His first Post byline was in 1992. His book "American Playwriting and the Anti-Political Prejudice" came out in 2014. Follow 

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