

about them that are heard. Reading the narratives provokes self-reflection, something that is invaluable to the physician and other care providers who wish to journey with dying people.

Who should read this book? Those who teach palliative care will want to use this book in their work. Practitioners will find that it affirms the work they do. Indeed, all health professionals may find

enrichment and inspiration in this text.

The title, *Crossing Over*, is meant to illustrate the many physical, emotional and spiritual leaps that the authors witnessed during their study. Patients, families and care providers “crossed over” to other viewpoints and to new journeys and roles. This book allows us to cross over into the world of the patient and family in a moving and educational way.

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Reference

1. Ramsey P. *The patient as person*. New Haven (CT): Yale University Press; 1970. p. 153.

At wit's end

Wit

Vancouver Playhouse Theatre

January 8 to February 3, 2001

Written by Margaret Edson; directed by Glynis Leyshon

Starring Seana McKenna, Alex Poch-Goldin and Joy Coghill



Wit, the Pulitzer Prize winning play by first-time American playwright Margaret Edson, is relative to its subject matter a defiantly funny work. The protagonist is Dr. Vivian Bearing, an English professor who has dedicated her career to the complex

nosis. “I have stage 4 cancer,” she reflects ruefully after the doctor has left. “There is no stage 5.”

The overlay of Bearing’s preoccupation with language and the medical staff’s fixation on her illness creates a tale of two solitudes and dual obsessions as she journeys through a series of eight toxic treatments. As her self-assured persona of the acclaimed academic is gradually stripped away, she seeks and finds, with the help of a compassionate nurse, a renewed humanity.

Blending Bearing’s irrepressible intellectual vigour and humour with strong supporting characters (particularly



verse of the 17th-century “metaphysical” poet John Donne. Bearing is diagnosed with Stage 4 ovarian cancer, and she agrees to an experimental trial of highly aggressive chemotherapy, which she approaches in the same way as she studies Donne’s “Holy Sonnets” on mortality and salvation: passionately pursuing the meaning of words. The first barrage of medical terms — “insidious,” “antineoplastic,” “epithelial” — is volleyed in the opening scene, when she is matter-of-factly informed of her diag-

Jason Posner, the medical research associate) the mood of the play ranges from wit to poignancy. Convincingly played by Seana McKenna, Bearing speaks directly to the audience throughout the play, and she is engaging from the opening scene until her final flight at the moment of her death. The conviction of Bearing’s performance — her own mother is living with advanced ovarian cancer — was acknowledged with a standing ovation the night this reviewer attended.

Jason Posner, played by Alex Poch-Goldin, values Bearing for what he can learn from her treatment. He dismisses instruction in bedside manner as “a waste of time for researchers” and instead obsesses over clinical details. Nonetheless, his self-absorption and lack of insight into Bearing’s psychological needs gradually give way to compassion as she approaches death.

Cheryl Brown of the Ovarian Cancer Alliance in Vancouver welcomes the awareness of ovarian cancer that has been generated by performances of *Wit* across the country. “We are trying to wake Canada up to ovarian cancer,” she says. “In general it has not been talked about.” Asked if she finds the medical characters in the play believable, Brown replies that the limitations of Bearing’s care aren’t representative of her own experience in BC, although “it would be an accurate portrayal of others’ experiences, in other parts of the country.” She points out that the play is now ten years old and does not reflect advances in palliative care. Bearing faces death with only one nurse attending to her emotional needs. Although this sparseness highlights the drama, the lack of other team players undercuts the play’s credibility.

Margaret Edson, who wrote this play as a response to work experience on a cancer ward, donated her Pulitzer Prize money to set up a foundation to teach medical students better bedside manner. Interestingly after the success of *Wit*, she is not planning to write another play and has returned to teaching kindergarten.

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