

'Sylvia' chronicles the love of a man and his dog

By **ARIANA SMITH**

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They say a dog is man's best friend, but you may rethink this philosophy after seeing "Sylvia," a play by A.R. Gurney, to be performed by the Jewel Theatre Company at Actors' Theatre in downtown Santa Cruz.

This romantic comedy follows the story of Greg and Kate, a married couple of 20 years with grown children whose lives are suddenly interrupted when Greg's mid-life crisis compels him to bring home a stray dog, Sylvia. While his wife immediately demands him to get rid of the dog, Greg ends up bonding with Sylvia, finding comfort in his new companion that gives him an escape from the job he hates and the unknowns

of middle age.

"Anyone who knows a dog will relate to this play," says director Diana Torres Koss. "It puts the spotlight on our amazing, amusing and sometimes obsessive relationships with canines."

When Greg finds life-changing inspiration in Sylvia, and his relationship with her becomes borderline obsessive, Kate sees the dog as a rival for affection. But the most interesting part about this play is that the role of Sylvia is actually played by a human — actress Julie James — sans any makeup or dog-esque costuming. And on top of that, she talks.

"The way he wrote it, it's just a given that the dog talks," says Julie James, who plays Sylvia. "Here's a dog that is kind of per-

sonified and able to communicate things that your dog might be thinking. Like the way you punish them, they'll give you that look — Sylvia would actually vocalize that look, saying something like, 'OK. Fine, I'm sitting down!' Or there was one time she was in heat, and so she talks about how she's feeling sexy."

This element of personification brings together dog and human qualities in the character of Sylvia, putting a whole new spin on our idea of people's relationship with their dogs and how they can really affect each other.

"I understand what they're saying when they talk to me," explains James, "but he [Gurney] maintains that there's a difference in



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From left: Diahanna Davidson, Julie James and Shaun Carroll star in 'Sylvia.'

the way we look at the world. But Sylvia is good at bringing it all together saying, 'Here's what I've learned from you humans.'"

The production of "Sylvia" will run from Friday, through Aug. 30. Through-

out the run, there will be opportunities to donate doggie goods to the Santa Cruz Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Audience members are encouraged to bring anything from old blankets

to new toys.

"Come prepared to laugh out loud," says Koss, "then go home thinking about your dog a little differently."

IF YOU GO
'SYLVIA' BY A.R. GURNEY

PRESENTED BY: Jewel Theatre Company
WHERE: Actors' Theatre, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz
WHEN: Opening Friday, through Aug. 30; Thursday, Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m.; Sunday matinees at 2 p.m.; preview tonight at 8 p.m.
COST: Preview night, \$20; all other performances: adult \$25, senior/student \$22