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Photo: Mark Garvin

A Haunting Portrayal of Illness and Family

by Kristi Yeung

[Theatre Philadelphia](#) and thINKingDANCE continue our partnership, begun in 2018, bringing coverage and new perspectives to Philadelphia's vibrant theatre scene.

The [Philadelphia Theatre Company](#)'s production of *A Small Fire*, written by [Adam Bock](#) and directed by [Joanie Schultz](#), is a surprisingly appropriate show to watch around Halloween. A horror story of sorts, *A Small Fire* features not ghosts, goblins, or skeletons but something much scarier: an inexplicable illness that shatters a woman's sense of normalcy and challenges her closest relationships.

Emily Bridges, played by two-time Emmy Award winner [Bebe Neuwirth](#), is the boss at work and at home when she discovers she has an undiagnosable illness impairing her physical senses. A woman who gives a lot of sass and takes none in return, she initially dismisses her ailments as "nothing." However, this *nothing* slowly transforms into *something*—an all-consuming, life-altering force.

Central to the play are Emily's relationships with her husband John (John Dossett), her daughter Jenny (Sarah Gliko), and her friend and coworker Billy Fontaine (Oge Agulué). Gesture and touch are key in portraying how these relationships change as a result of Emily's illness. At first, Emily and John's marriage is little more than mutual cohabitation. In their first scene together, they sit on opposite ends of a couch, with no physical contact. Near the play's end, there is hardly a moment in which they are not touching. Emily and Jenny's relationship is strained from the start, and Emily's illness only magnifies this tension. Jenny keeps her body far from Emily's even when holding her shoulders, displaying her inability to come to her mother's side, physically and emotionally, during a time of need. Emily's employee, Billy, becomes her closest friend, transitioning from a worker who takes orders from across a table to a

familiar presence exchanging playful slaps and nudges while sitting side-by-side with Emily at her home.

Emily's transformation from an independent woman to a dependent patient is also conveyed physically. Gradually diminishing her posture and voice, Neuwirth seamlessly shifts from a presence who cannot be ignored to one easily forgotten. In a particularly unnerving scene—one that presents Emily's frustration over losing her senses—she moves stoically across the stage as her fingers desperately crawl through the air, searching for something just beyond reach.

Though there are many poignant scenes, there are just as many lighthearted and humorous ones. Agulué, as Billy, contributes boisterous energy to the stage, literally jumping for joy in a way that nearly brings me out of my own seat. Billy's jokes, quirky interests, and animated expressions of happiness, along with John's warmth and Emily's bursts of fieriness, lift the overall mood. The layers of the set, designed by Chelsea M. Warren, gradually peel away, lightening the atmosphere as the characters' conflicts deepen.

A Small Fire shows how we cope in less-than-ideal situations—the ways we sometimes laugh at misfortune, fret over the mundane during crises, and celebrate even though a loved one is sick. Watching these humanly ironic moments, I am moved and also comforted. As someone planning her wedding despite having an unwell family member, I see myself uncannily reflected in this play, and the characters' struggles, along with their emotional reactions, stay with me—haunting me—long after the final scene.

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[A Small Fire](#), Philadelphia Theatre Company, Suzanne Roberts Theatre, October 18-November 10.

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