Next on our stage:

TIGERS BE STILL
JAN. 21-FEB. 21

THE ELEPHANT MAN
MARCH 17-APRIL 17

I AND YOU
MAY 19-JUNE 19

A companion guide to
Tigers Be Still
by Kim Rosenstock
Synopsis

When you’re stuck in a rut, it’s time to do something. Anything. In this comedy about depression, “Top Gun,” and chihuahuas, Sherry Wickman has recently earned a degree in art therapy — only to find herself moving back in with her family, where she retreats to her bed until a job opportunity gives her new purpose. Now if only her mother would come downstairs, her sister would get off the couch, her first patient would do one of his assignments, her boss would leave his gun at home, and someone would catch the tiger that escaped from the local zoo, everything would be just perfect.

Characters

Sherry: A kind, sensitive 24-year-old who recently earned a master’s degree in art therapy — and then fell into a depression after being unable to find a job. At the play’s start, she finally has a new position and is determined to make a new start. As the script states, she has “an upbeat but slightly nervous energy.”

Zack: Eighteen and living in between high school and what comes next, he works at a drugstore, tolerates a semi-estranged relationship with his father, and is preoccupied with heavy grief after a major loss. Sometimes hostile, often funny. Sherry is determined to find his softer side.

Grace: Sherry’s sister, 29, and a permanent fixture on the couch. She’s embittered and self-pitying after a broken engagement, finding dubious comfort in drinking Jack and repeatedly watching “Top Gun.” Though she can be insulting, Grace is also darkly hilarious.

Joseph: Sherry’s new boss, Joseph, 50, is a high school principal who struggles to keep his students safe, be an encouraging mentor to Sherry, and reconnect with his troubled son. Most of the time, he’s unsuccessful at all of these things. (Have you tried his cooking?) But his heart is always in the right place.
A comedy about depression? Really?

We like a wild mix of shows at City Lights, and on our stage we’ve laughed about everything from killer rabbits to people being eaten by bears. A comedy about depression, though, was an unusual prospect.

It helps that this script is irresistible. It’s a blend of dark humor and unexpected hope, with a smart message: You may not be able to make your life perfect, but we know you can take that one first step to make it different. And that’s worthy of applause.

Playwright Kim Rosenstock is very clear that Tigers Be Still is a comedy. A comedy about flawed people, loss, and getting stuck, but definitely a comedy. She writes in a foreword to the script:

“When I started this play, I was setting out to investigate the ways people locate joy in their lives during dark times. At some point I realized that I was writing a comedy about depression. And I decided that in order to maintain the comedic tone, there could only be a handful of moments in which the characters allowed themselves to stare directly into the void. I believe these ‘void moments’ only have space to land when an effortful search for joy surrounds them.”

This is the South Bay premiere for Tigers Be Still, which had a successful run at San Francisco Playhouse in 2011. The play originally opened in 2010, Off-Broadway at the Roundabout Theatre Company, where it had a sold-out run and earned a New York Times Critics’ Pick. Actress / playwright Halley Feiffer played Sherry; film and TV actress Natasha Lyonne was Grace.

Kim Rosenstock has written several plays, as well as conceiving the musical Fly By Night, which she wrote with Will Connolly and Michael Mitnick. That was a hit at TheatreWorks’ New Works Festival and ended up on the TheatreWorks main stage in 2011.

In TV, Kim has been a writer, executive story editor and co-producer of the Zooey Deschanel comedy New Girl. Originally hailing from Long Island, she holds an MFA in playwriting from Yale School of Drama.

Grace: “I liked you better when you were unemployed; you were more mellow.”
Sherry: “I was paralyzed with depression.”
Grace: “You were a great listener.”

-Tigers Be Still
A few words from the cast

| Grace is far from the first City Lights role for Akemi Okamura. Besides having been an actor, intern, and assistant director, she’s worked in casting and dramaturgy. When she read Tigers, Akemi instantly wanted to be in the show. “It’s a comedy, and these characters are so funny, but there’s so much heart to it. You laugh and that draws you in, but when the rug is pulled out from under them, you’re really open to it,” she said. “Grace doesn’t care how she acts. She’s salty in this wonderful way, but I don’t think it’s malicious. It’s how she’s dealing with her grief.”

By day, Akemi works at TheatreWorks as FutureWorks Fellow and assistant artistic director. What other roles would she love to play? “I would like to take a stab, no pun intended, at Lady M,” she said. “And Paulina in A Winter’s Tale.”

Laughing, she added, “I would love to be in an Indiana Jones or Star Wars movie.” |

| Melissa Weinstein loves the kindness in her character, Sherry, just as she likes to identify with it. “In high school, my nickname was Mom. And I’m the oldest child of three. I always take care of people. … This rehearsal process has been a lot about straddling the line between being her and me.”

A classically trained opera singer and longtime performer, Melissa also works with Silicon Valley Shakespeare, designing hair and makeup. This is her first show at City Lights.

She likes Tigers’ universality. “Anybody who’s ever gone through a loss, whether it’s a loss of a relationship or a dream deferred, will identify.”

Fittingly for her background, Melissa’s dream roles are musical: Marian in The Music Man, Sarah in Guys and Dolls, and Francesca in The Bridges of Madison County. |

| Sean Okuniewicz (Zack), a Foothill College student, is back for his second City Lights show, after jetting around as Action in West Side Story last summer. “I’ve only ever done musicals or big, outward characters,” he said. “This is the first real, nuanced play that I’ve ever done. Someone who’s way closer to a real person.”

Sean can relate to Zack—they’re close to the same age, they’re both looking ahead to life after school—but feels connected to the other Tigers characters as well. “Almost anybody can know what it feels like to be these people, because they’re just people,” Sean said, adding, “This play is so closely written to the way we speak.”

Sean’s dream roles combine his love of musicals with his new affinity for serious roles: Gabe in Next to Normal, Jamie in The Last Five Years, Tony in West Side Story. |

| Keith Marshall (Joseph) says coming back to CLTC is always a priority for him. “There is a family quality to the way it is run. Actors/designers become quick friends and stay friends. It is the warm feeling that you are part of ‘the’ group from minute one that keeps me coming back.”

Keith enjoys working with Joseph’s sadness, but said, “Some of the moments I like best are the humor he brings just by being his awkward self. As he finds his emotions being tugged at during the course of the play, he creates this tension that is at times sad and hilarious.”

Keith’s dream-role list is wide open. “I don’t have any specific ones, but always look for the next role that will really push me to my limits.” |
What does the title mean? And other questions.

If City Lights had a book group, the meeting about the *Tigers Be Still* script would be a heck of an evening. Because these characters feel so real, we’ve had many conversations, theories, debates, and “that reminds me of the time I...” thoughts buzzing around the theater.

Here are some of the questions we keep coming back to, many of them sparked by a terrific study guide to the play that was published by the Public Theatre.

Got your own answers? Leave a comment on Facebook or Twitter, or send a note to rebecca@cltc.org.

**What does the title mean?** That depends on whether you read it with an implicit comma or without. With “Tigers, be still,” you could be telling some beasts to pipe down. “Tigers be still” is a more basic declarative statement. But the jury’s still out on whether the tigers are quiet or just still here (watch out). Perhaps the more important question is: who are the tigers? Furry big cats who escape from the zoo, or our inner beasts attacking us from the inside?

**Why does Grace steal her ex-fiancé’s stuff?** Akemi Okamura, who plays Grace in our production, has a hypothesis. Since Grace never got any closure—the relationship just exploded—maybe taking Troy’s things is a last-ditch way of making a connection. “If I take enough of his stuff, eventually he’s going to want it back,” Akemi said, speaking as her character. “Surely if I take the dogs, he will man up and come talk to me!”

**Why do all these people have trouble fixing their own lives?** That’s a piece of the play that Sean Okuniewicz, who plays Zack, really likes. “They all have a moment of almost healing and almost being OK with whatever’s going on—and then they fall back,” he mused. “There’s that hesitation of: at least this is comfortable. They don’t really know what the feeling of being fixed feels like.”

**Why does Grace watch *Top Gun* over and over?** We’d say the volleyball scene, but that’s just us.

**Will Sherry be a good art therapist?** Melissa Weinstein, who plays Sherry, is hopeful. “Sherry is at her best when she stops trying, when she just is. When she allows herself to be enough.”

**Why does Zack give Sherry his mother’s shoes?** That one we’re going to let you see for yourself in the play.

*Zack (Sean Okuniewicz) is unsure of the etiquette in a situation where your therapist’s sister (Akemi Okamura) passes out on you.*
“Plastics”: Other fine tales of post-graduation malaise

If there’s one time in our lives when we can relate to Sherry, it’s the time after earning a degree and before snagging a job. How many of us have felt confused and directionless over not knowing what comes next?

Fortunately, no one is alone in this. And you don’t have to keep watching Top Gun for cinematic therapy. Movies have many, many examples of post-graduation malaise that can inspire us—or make us feel better about our own lives. Here are three silver-screen examples from three decades.

P.S. We’ll present another post-graduation tale at City Lights this spring: a developmental workshop of Jeffrey Lo’s play Dealing Dreams. These young characters are trying to find their place in the Silicon Valley tech world, so the script may hit close to home. Performances are Wednesday, April 20, at 7:30 p.m., Thursday-Saturday, April 21-23, at 8 p.m., and Sunday, April 24, at 2 p.m.

The Graduate (1967)

Dustin Hoffman floating on a raft with no idea what to do after college: that’s a central image of the ’60s. (Hint: Whatever you do, don’t take career advice from your dad’s friends.) Young Benjamin Braddock gets seduced by an older woman, falls in love with her daughter, goes on the worst first date ever, and ends up on an epic bus ride. Blink and you’ll miss a painfully young Richard Dreyfuss.

Notable quote:

Mr. Braddock: Ben, what are you doing?
Benjamin: Well, I would say that I’m just drifting. Here in the pool.
Mr. Braddock: Why?
Benjamin: Well, it’s very comfortable just to drift here.

Reality Bites (1994)

Winona Ryder, Ethan Hawke, Ben Stiller, Janeane Garofalo and a slacker-y Gen X vibe. Who needs a real job when you can work at the Gap? Lelaina (Ryder) bombs interview after interview, but we have a sneaking suspicion that bad-boy rocker Troy (Hawke) will end up as a consolation. In an ironic sense, of course.

Notable quote:

Lelaina: I’d like to somehow make a difference in people’s lives.
Troy: And I … I would like to buy them all a Coke.

Tiny Furniture (2010)

Lena Dunham’s breakout film: she wrote, directed, and starred in this meanderingly paced story of post-graduate Aura crashing back at home with Mom (played by Dunham’s real mother, Laurie Simmons) and trying to figure it all out. Jemima Kirke, who would later show up in TV’s Girls with Dunham, plays a friend and terrible influence. There’s also a white hamster who may or may not be symbolic of something.

Notable quote:

Aura: I have no experience.
Charlotte: It’s absolutely fine. On my resume under “skills,” I put “has a landline.”
City Lights Theater Company presents *Tigers Be Still* from Jan. 21 through Feb. 21, 2016. Shows are Thurs.-Sat. at 8 p.m., Sundays at 2 p.m. (no show Jan. 24), at 529 S. Second St., San Jose. Details: cltc.org, 408-295-4200

**Tigers Be Still**

*by Kim Rosenstock*

Director: **Virginia Drake**
Assistant Director: **Jacquelyn Montellato**
Stage Manager: **Ben Hemmen**
Assistant Stage Manager: **Joseph Hidde**
Scenic Design/Production Manager/Technical Director: **Ron Gasparinetti**
Lighting Design: **Nick Kumamoto**
Costume Design: **Anna Chase**
Props Designer: **Christina Sturken**
Sound Design: **George Psarras**
Carpenter: **Joseph Hidde**

**Cast**

Sherry: **Melissa Weinstein**
Zack: **Sean Okuniewicz**
Grace: **Akemi Okamura**
Joseph: **Keith Marshall**

*Highlights* is researched and written by City Lights dramaturg Rebecca Wallace. Read past issues at [cltc.org/highlights](http://cltc.org/highlights).
"Today is good. Because today I'm getting out of the house."

"Tigers Be Still" by Kim Rosenstock
Jan. 21-Feb. 21, 2016