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Just keep swimming

Dragon offers poignant production of British dramedy

by Karla Kane / Palo Alto Weekly

Dragon Productions Theatre Company has been waiting a long time to produce the regional premiere of British playwright Charlotte Jones' "Airschwimming." Executive Artistic Director Meredith Hagedorn, who also directed the current production, fell in love with Jones' work a decade ago and even had her cast members all picked out based on the chemistry she saw between them in another local production. Finally, years later, the rights were granted and the cast (Annamarie MacLeod and Katie Anderson) was ready to bring "Airschwimming" (which first opened in 1997) alive for local audiences. It was worth the wait.

"Airschwimming" is, according to Jones, "a comedy about despair." I'd be hesitant to call this look at a shameful slice of recent history a comedy, but then again, it is quite funny at times, in a "Grey Gardens" and "The Odd Couple" kind of way.

Based on the true experiences of many women in England, Ireland and elsewhere, the play focuses on Persephone (Anderson) and Dora (MacLeod), two young women who are locked up in St. Dymphna's Hospital for the Criminally Insane. They're incarcerated on the cusp of adulthood in the early 1920s and not released until the 1970s (Jones was inspired after reading about the release of two real women from a similar institution after 50 years). The reasons women were cast out of "proper" society and locked away in abysmal, isolated, abusive facilities such as this were myriad. In Persephone and Dora's cases, they were deemed "moral imbeciles" for unacceptable behaviors such as having sex before marriage, bearing illegitimate babies, and having a desire to wear men's clothing.

When they first meet, Persephone is a fragile, snobby creature from a posh background, convinced that any day her parents will return for her and she can finally have the debutante ball and high-society life she's entitled to. She butts heads with gregarious, hearty Dora, who longs for the heroic life of a soldier she could never have and weeps for her three brothers, who perished in the Great War. Initially, Persephone bristles at Dora's bluff, masculine manner and compulsive recitations of military and historical facts and dates, while Dora shows little sympathy to Persephone's dim-witted, swoony ways. But the one hour



Annamarie MacLeod and Katie Anderson play two women who form a tight bond while institutionalized in "Airschwimming." Photo by Lance Huntley



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per day they spend in each other's company scrubbing the shabby stairs and bathroom of their asylum (the only time for human company they receive), proves to be a lifeline as the two bond, share stories and eventually become as close as sisters, as intimate as spouses in some ways.

The years turn to decades and before they know it, they're elderly and co-dependent, with a rich, imaginative world of their own creation, including their affectionate nicknames: Porph and Dorph.

The play jumps back and forth between the early days and the Porph-and-Dorph years, providing plenty of humorous moments (such as Porph's obsessive love for wholesome Hollywood icon Doris Day), wrenching scenes of sadness for what these women have been put through, and poignant glimpses into their devotion to one another.

With no intermission, the production is intense and relentless. A problem with the lights at the preview I attended meant there were no blackouts or dramatic theater lighting but the quality of the performances made that technical glitch irrelevant. Jones' script is witty and compelling, and Hagedorn's staging lively. Crucially, her instincts were right on when she first thought of MacLeod and Anderson for these roles years ago. They're simply splendid.

Anderson's Porph is full of childlike wonder, and her singing voice, when breaking into Day songs, is lovely. MacLeod's Dorph is weary and briskly no-nonsense most of the time, with moments of dark vulnerability. Both ace the transitions back and forth between their characters' old-age selves and their younger years, with MacLeod especially effective at changing her posture from chipper, headstrong young Dora to stooped, broken Dorph. Sometimes accents in local theater productions can be a bit dodgy. Not so here: Dialect coach Richard Newton has earned his keep, as both actors have delightfully old-fashioned English mannerisms and sound, with their voices also slightly evolving as the play shifts back and forth in time.

After all their years trapped in a derelict mental institution, the pair do seem to descend into madness, and who could blame them? They've simply done the best they can with what life's unfairly given them. To quote Porph's beloved Doris Day, "que sera, sera." They make proverbial lemons out of lemonade; dreaming of swimming the channel, they put on their goggles and swim in the air. Their circumstances are heartbreaking but it's heartwarming, too, to watch them discover and cling to whatever helps preserve their humanity.

What: "Airswimming"

Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City

When: Through Aug. 27 (see website for detailed schedule)

Cost: \$27-\$35

Info: Go to [Dragon Productions](#)

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