

FEATURED

Dragon Theatre stages 'Airswimming'

Institutionalized women form friendship, find ways to cope

By Judy Richter Daily Journal correspondent 16 hrs ago



In "Airswimming," presented by Dragon Theatre, playwright Charlotte Jones personalizes a dark chapter in Irish history.

For some two centuries, ending in 1996, both sexes, but especially women, were institutionalized because they were marginalized for various reasons. Having a baby out of wedlock was a sure reason.

The two-woman "Airswimming" takes place in the fictional St. Dymphna's Hospital for the Criminally Insane between 1924 and 1972. Dora, also called Dorph

(Annamarie MacLeod), got there first. Persephone, also called Porph (Katie Anderson), arrived two years later.

She says she was labeled a moral imbecile, but she insists she doesn't belong there and will be released soon. The more seasoned Dorph knows better.

Although their early encounters can be contentious, they develop a friendship and reveal more about themselves. The emotional Porph is a huge fan of Doris Day, often donning a blonde wig and singing some of her signature songs.

In more enlightened times, Dorph, who liked to smoke cigars, might have been a butch lesbian or maybe even a transsexual. Instead, she expresses her admiration for the military and sometimes behaves as if she were an officer.

As the years wear on, the women take on different roles. Dorph, who had been the strong one, becomes more dependant. Thus Porph becomes strong and encourages her friend not to give up.

Well directed by Meredith Hagedorn, Dragon's founder and artistic director, the actresses embody their characters convincingly. Each one is always in the moment.

However interesting the play is, though, it has weaknesses, perhaps because it was Jones' first play.

The most obvious is that during most of its more than 100 minutes without intermission, there's little sense of where it's going, but it finally comes to some resolution.

Then, as is often true in plays, it opens the door to wondering what happens next. What will these two women do after so many years of institutionalization and mutual dependency?

"Airswimming," which refers to a coping mechanism for the women, will continue through Aug. 27 at Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway, Redwood City. For tickets and information call (650) 493-2006, Ext. 2 or visit www.dragonproductions.net.