

Entertainment

Dragon Theatre stages a lively ‘Dead Accounts’

Juicy little play is amusing, although ending leaves something to be desired



Michael Champlin, Kristen Kaye Lo and Brian Flegel, from left, in “Dead Accounts” at Dragon Theatre in Redwood City through Feb. 19, 2017. (Lance Huntley / Dragon Theatre)

By **JOANNE ENGELHARDT** | For The Daily News

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Would someone please take the Red Bull away from Michael Champlin?

The guy comes out revving on all eight cylinders in the trifling, prickly yet juicy little Theresa Rebeck play, “Dead Accounts,” which runs three more weeks at Dragon Productions Theatre in downtown Redwood City.

Actually, maybe it’s the pints and pints of Graeter’s ice cream, a hometown delicacy in Cincinnati, Ohio, where Champlin, as Jack, the family’s renegade who moved to New York to make it big as a banker, has returned. Exactly how big he made it as a banker is yet to be revealed.

But suddenly he’s back at the family home, in the cluttered, well-worn, hospitable kitchen of his childhood (thanks to R. Dutch Fritz’s so-perfect replica of a Midwestern kitchen). Cincinnati Reds cap backward, wild Irish eyes unfocused, gobbling down spoonful after spoonful of the aforementioned ice cream, Jack is definitely jacked up as he yaks endlessly about how great it is to look out into the backyard and see trees!

Sister Lorna (a steady Kristen Kaye Lo) sits nearby, in jammies, bathrobe and slippers, a little sleepy and totally confused about why Jack has suddenly turned up in Cincinnati — unannounced — when his banking job and his wife are in New York.

By morning, mom Barbara (Jackie O’Keefe) putters around the kitchen, endlessly cleaning and clipping coupons, asking Lorna about Jack and proving to be hilariously clueless. (Check out her response every time someone talks on the phone when she’s in the same room.)

Conversations, sometimes intriguing, sometimes time-stretchers, ensue, including a scene with Jack’s old high school buddy, Phil (a centered Brian Flegel). They drink beer, chow down on Cheese Cones (hot dogs), and more ice cream. Jack’s poor dad is upstairs, suffering from kidney stones and in a lot of pain.

Right about now the audience starts to wonder, “What’s this play all about? What’s the point?”

Enter Jack's estranged/former/separated wife, Jenny (a devastatingly shrewish Janine Saunders Evans) who despises Jack's family (apparently the feeling is mutual). She drops a bombshell on the family just as Act 1 ends.

As the same scene continues in Act 2, accusations of "grand larceny," "embezzlement" and "stealing" are hurled about as Jack sits around exclaiming to his dumbfounded family that "the truth is complicated."

Eventually the meaning of the play title comes out: "Dead Accounts" (not to be confused with the recent Ben Affleck movie "The Accountant," which was DOA at the box office) are the accounts of dead people that still have money in them — and that no one has claimed. Bored one day with his usual job, good old Jack decides to move a few of them into his accounts. Eventually he tallies up a handsome sum indeed.

There are still enough twists coming up in Act 2 to keep audiences interested, but just barely. The ending disappoints because it resolves nothing and yet attempts to tie up several storylines too quickly.

The acting is stellar throughout, even when Rebeck's script lets them down. It's hard to take your eyes away from Champlin, that scene-stealer, even when he's doing nothing but eating (he does a lot of that in this play). It's great that both Champlin and O'Keefe are redheads, the better to illustrate their relationship, and Lo's soft blond hair compliments both of them.

O'Keefe, too, has never been better than when she's jabbering non-stop while talking over people on the telephone in the same room (making it difficult, actually, to understand what either person is saying). And she nails the 'praise God for everything' attitude of longtime Midwesterners.

By contrast, Evans is steely, fidgety, obviously unhappy and, apparently as the spoiled child of wealthy parents, determined to get her way.

The sixth "character" in the play has to be Fritz's authentic family kitchen, complete with vinyl-and-chrome kitchen chairs, collectible plates hanging on the walls (as well as one of those 1960's-era copper molds for Jell-O).

Champlin and Lo are credited as co-directors, so perhaps each directed the other and cooperated on the rest of the cast. They definitely make an effort to keep things rolling along swiftly and likely are only hampered by some of the script's more mundane moments.

Lance Huntley's sound design and William Campbell's lighting work well in Dragon's irregularly shaped theater, and Tahiya Marome's costumes seem right at home in this play.

By final curtain, the audience seems satisfied that they've invested their time wisely. Besides, who can argue with Jack's statement that "Everyone needs ice cream. It's one of God's benedictions."

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Theater

What: "Dead Accounts"

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

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Through: Feb. 19

Tickets: \$27-35; 650-493-2006 or
www.dragonproductions.net

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