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## Main Street, Wall Street and a whole lot of ice cream

'Dead Accounts' strives for insights about a divided America but relies on cliché

by Karla Kane / Palo Alto Weekly

When prodigal son Jack (Michael Champlin) ditches his hot-shot life in the Big Apple and returns to his parents' house in suburban Cincinnati, his kid sister Lorna (Kristen Kaye Lo) is immediately skeptical. Former golden-child Jack is full of bravado, stories and \$1,000 worth of local ice cream (the food in New York, it seems, cannot compare) but no explanation for his sudden, late-night visit.

The clash between perceived Midwest and New York values, as experienced by Jack and the rest of his family, forms the basis of Theresa Rebeck's 2012 dramedy "Dead Accounts," on stage now at Redwood City's Dragon Theatre. And though the production is of high quality and offers some good laughs, Rebeck's somewhat shallow play itself doesn't quite live up to the talent of the Dragon crew.

Lorna and Jack, two out of the six siblings in the family (and the only ones seen on stage), have followed divergent paths since high school. Lorna's stayed at home, literally, looking after her aging parents, arguing with her devoutly Catholic mother (Jackie O'Keefe) about religion, worrying about her father's failing health, and wallowing in boredom. Jack set off for a life of glamour and adventure in New York City, where he forged a high-paying career in finance and married patrician Jenny (Janine Saunders Evans), an old-money, Mayflower descendent who doesn't find much common ground with her in-laws. Jack is charismatic and charming, with a hints of a darker, unhinged edge to his jovial energy (his joke about having killed his wife, for example, does not amuse his sister). It's obvious from the start that he is hiding something (or hiding from someone, perhaps) and he's torn between his New York and Ohio selves, as evidenced even by his clothing: Armani suits mismatched with a Cincinnati Reds cap and old band t-shirts.

The cast is rounded out by Brian Flegel as Phil, Jack's mild-mannered childhood friend, who has a longtime crush on Lorna and has settled happily into adulthood, satisfied by his hometown and placid accounting career.

Jack's surprising return and the reason behind it (it has to do with that banking job and the titular "dead accounts" dormant funds Jack considers fair game) threaten to bring disruption and ethical quandaries to the whole clan, for better or worse.



Siblings Lorna and Jack (Kristen Kaye Lo and Michael Champlin) reunite over ice cream in "Dead Accounts" at the Dragon Theatre. Photo by James Kasyan.



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Champlin and Lo are the production's capable co-directors as well as co-stars and both bring crackling energy to their roles. Champlin's part is the showiest and he imbues Jack with a blend of charisma and mania. He's a lovable-but-irritating rogue; the audience gets a sense of why Jenny might have fallen for him and why she might have had enough of him. Not exactly a villain but not particularly heroic either, Champlin's Jack grips the audience from his first, ice-cream-full scene and never lets go. (He also wolfs down chili, hot dogs, beer, pizza and more over the course of the show. Audience members may be extra hungry at intermission after seeing the on-stage snacks.)

Lo's embittered Lorna is sympathetic even while whining about diets or bickering with her family members, and Flegel's Phil is bland sweetness personified, hoping to cheer up everyone. O'Keefe as matriarch Barbara is natural, warm, overbearing and a bit clueless while Evans brings a smidgen of personality to ice-queen Jenny when the script allows.

Dragon's scenic designer R. Dutch Fritz and properties master Charlynn Knighton have gone above and beyond in creating a wonderfully believable Midwestern home kitchen, complete with appliances and rich with details such as coupons and family photos on the fridge, piles of mail, shelves of cookbooks and even a cute-animal calendar on the wall.

The problem with "Dead Accounts" lies not with the cast or production but rather Rebeck's story and script itself. Too much time is spent on cliches of New Yorkers as elitist snobs who look down on humble, salt-of-the-Earth Midwesterners, and cheap jokes about Catholicism/Brooklyn/box wine/etc. Jack repeatedly rants about how New Yorkers think Ohioans are stupid; how New Yorkers have no manners; how New Yorkers hate trees, and church and don't understand good honest food. The character of Jenny reinforces these cartoonish stereotypes as she berates her mother-in-law's decor (even if she does show a more nuanced side eventually). Certainly, some cultural divides exist, but Jack's (and Rebeck's) characterizations wear thin quickly. And while there are plenty of funny exchanges, the tone is uneven when the show turns more serious. Lorna gives a righteous tirade against the banking industry, and posits the interesting idea that money and religion serve the same purpose, but these issues are not explored in nearly enough depth.

"Dead Accounts" has its moments, including Lorna's lovely memory about planting trees. Go to soak up those tidbits, laugh at some snappy dialogue and appreciate the likeable Dragon cast -- just don't expect a modern masterpiece.

**What:** "Dead Accounts"

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

**When:** Through Feb. 19; Thursday-Saturday at 8 p.m.; Sunday at 2 p.m.

**Cost:** \$27-\$35

**Info:** Go to [Dragon Productions](#)

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