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A meeting of the minds

Dragon Theatre kicks off 2018 season with 'Insignificance'

by Karla Kane / Palo Alto Weekly

According to scientist Albert Einstein, "imagination is more important than knowledge." In his play "Insignificance," British playwright Terry Johnson's imagination mixes together four very different icons of 20th century America -- Einstein included -- and ponders the what-ifs of their imagined meeting in a New York hotel room one fateful night in the early 1950s. As presented by Dragon Productions Theatre Company and directed by Laura Jane Bailey, "Insignificance" is an intriguing, playful thought experiment on celebrity, sex, power and science.



The Professor (Jim Johnson) discusses fame with The Ballplayer (Nick Mandracchia) in Dragon Theatre's production of "Insignificance." Photo by Lance Huntley.

In the play, the characters are never named and credited only as The Professor (Jim Johnson), The Actress (Jessica Lea Risco), The Senator (Gary Mosher) and The Ballplayer (Nick Mandracchia), but there is no doubt about whom they're representing: Einstein, actress Marilyn Monroe, Senator Joe McCarthy and Monroe's estranged husband, baseball great Joe DiMaggio. And though Einstein, with his socialist and pacifist inclinations, was a target of inquiry for McCarthyism, Monroe was rumored to have had an interest in Einstein and she and DiMaggio really did have a doomed romance, the events and entanglements of "Insignificance" are quite fictional.

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Throughout the show, Johnson's script challenges audience expectations for these archetypal figures, toying with what the audience knows (or thinks it knows) about them and using them as a springboard for pondering the nature of fame, and even the nature of the universe itself.

Plot-wise, the show is mostly talk and little action. The Senator, at the peak of his zealous quest to ferret out communists, visits The Professor's hotel room to try and pressure him into testifying in front of congress and proving his loyalty to America and its developing nuclear program. The Actress also turns up at the Professor's hotel room, after completing filming a certain famous movie scene in which her white dress is blown by a gust of air. Though famous for her dumb-blonde roles and sexpot reputation, she's desperate to talk scientific ideas with The Professor and to prove she's far smarter and more scholarly than people expect (OK, she also wants to seduce him.) She gives an exhilarating demonstration of his specific theory of relativity that's a joy to behold, and the aging genius is won over by her charms. Before long, however, her husband The Ballplayer is threatening to break the door down in a jealous rage and he joins the conversation, too.

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Throughout the course of the two-act play, the characters flit in and out of the room in various combinations and as the show progresses, it moves from mostly comedy to a darker, sadder climax. All the beauty, brains, money and influence in the world can't seem to bring much joy to any of the restless celebrities. Together, they provide examples of several different routes to fame and power: through physical strength and talent, through sex and art, through politics, and through intelligence. All used to being at the tops of their respective fields, when thrown together they vie for dominance, for cultural capital, and, to invoke the title, for significance.

The members of this unlikely foursome also provide framework for Johnson's script to explore significant scientific notions of space-time, solipsism and more in an easy-to-grasp, entertaining way, set against Eric Johnson's simple but effective hotel-room set (the atomic wall decor is an excellent midcentury-modern touch.) Sometimes the overly loud New York street-noise effects, on the other hand, make it difficult to hear the dialogue and go on for too long for seemingly no reason.

Though none of the actors physically resemble their real-life counterparts, Risco's white dress, blonde curls and breathy voice make her immediately recognizable as Monroe. She succeeds in portraying the Actress as vivacious, charming and seductive but also mentally unstable, fragile and incredibly wounded. Johnson sports Einstein's Princeton University sweatshirt (but not, surprisingly, his strong German accent nor his fluffy hairstyle). His Professor is gentle, witty and intellectually brilliant, but haunted by the role his own research inadvertently played in the creation of the atomic bomb and fears of the even more cataclysmic future events it could lead to. The Senator is loathsome and palpably menacing, but Mosher, chewing up the scenery, gives him a keen, crackling intelligence and slimy charm that demonstrates how he's risen to prominence in politics (note: The real Joe McCarthy was not a southerner, whereas this Senator has an over-the-top drawl and calls himself a Louisiana boy). At first, The Ballplayer is a willfully dumb jock and boorishly macho figure but he eventually reveals hidden depths and intelligence, as well as warmth. Mandracchia's performance (even if his presence was more John C. Reilly than DiMaggio) is ultimately quite endearing. He and Risco are touching in their melodramatic interactions with one another, both wanting desperately to connect but never truly understanding what makes the other tick.

The Dragon has titled their 2018 season the "Season of Everything" and "Insignificance," with its references to Einstein's attempts at finding a unified theory of the universe, seems a fitting choice of a season kickoff for the always-thoughtful theater company.

What: "Insignificance."

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

When: Through Feb. 18, Thursdays-Saturdays at 8 p.m.; Sundays at 2 p.m.

Cost: \$27 student/senior, \$35/general.

Info: Go to [Dragon Theatre](#).



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