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Insignificance

Dragon Productions Theatre

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Terry Johnson's 1982 play *Insignificance* imagines that in a cheap hotel, four people come together for a few short hours—people so universally recognizable that they are only referenced as The Professor, The Senator, The Actress, and The Ballplayer. Their conversations and confrontations, intense in words and in physicality, range from accusations to intellectual explorations to comic encounters. Subjects vary from who is a communist, what shape is the universe, and where does responsibility lie for a possible nuclear end of the world.

For the four, who must live daily with what the Ballplayer describes as "the fame thing [that] is enough to give you the heebies," that world-renown fame is not all that significant when compared to a desire to have a baby, to find love, to be left alone just to think, or to look up at the sky and see millions of stars and the possible worlds they represent.

Dragon Productions Theatre presents Terry Johnson's *Insignificance* to give its audience a unique opportunity to imagine "What if?" these four did in fact meet and to ponder with them the questions, issues, and dreams raised.



Jim Johnson and Jessica Lea Risco

Photo Courtesy of Dragon Productions Theatre

Without naming names, there is no doubt who the young woman is who comes knocking at 3 a.m. on the hotel door of a meek, older gentlemen—especially given her platinum blonde hair and a certain white dress that just finds a way to fling upward to expose her famous legs. With a voice slightly Southern and ever so recognizable, Marilyn (no last name necessary) coos, "Excuse the intrusion, but I've got something I've got to say to you before the morning." Almost immediately, she plops herself on the floor and uses toy trains and flashlights to explain the laws of relativity to a bemused but totally impressed man with a mustache. We soon know we are watching a smarter-than-most-think Monroe and meeker-than-most-might-imagine Einstein have a delightful time exploring topics in details that at times become a bit difficult for us to follow.

As the *tete-a-tete* between the not-so-ditzy blonde and the wild-haired genius begins to take new and surprising turns, there looms over their near-dawn meeting two other visitors, two Joes. Already, the Professor has been visited that night by a certain, crass Senator who has plans to bring the Holocaust survivor and world-renowned scientist before the notorious House Un-American Activities Committee to ask that yes/no question, "Were you now or have you ever been?" The Senator's intentions are nothing short of blackmail in order to get the Professor's buy-in to a new nuclear bomb deal before the Senate.

Joe's promise to come back the next morning to take the Professor to the hearings looms large but is not as immediate as a new pounding on the door by another Joe. The Ballplayer (and husband of the Actress) smashes into the room to find his wife in bed with an old man whose pants are down. The Italian blood rises, but the anger is mostly directed at a wife he rarely sees but clearly adores. Their interactions begin to paint a backdrop to a story many of us in the audience know of the marriage and its demise between Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio and to give us some insight as to why the soon-to-be ex-husband arranged for twenty years after her death to have roses put on her grave every week.

Jessica Lea Risco is nothing short of superb as the Actress, providing both the expected Marilyn voice, movements, sexiness, and showing of legs but also the unexpected intellectual curiosity and quite deep understanding for some of the more complex concepts of the universe. Her Marilyn is reason enough to see this particular production, for she is certainly the star whenever she is on stage.

Harder to swallow at times is Jim Johnson's depiction of the low-drive, non-reactive Professor. His 70-year-old Einstein is just short of doddering and is meeker, more mild-spoken than one might imagine the world's greatest mind might be, even when coming face-to-face with the world's most famous, most beautiful actress. The main way this Professor interacts is by looking downward with slumped shoulders and avoiding eye contact as if embarrassed. The portrayal seems too one-dimensional for too much of the almost two-hour play.

As the Senator, Gary Mosher is convincingly mean, ego-centric, and obnoxious; and his potential harm to those who are innocent comes across in the venomous personality he portrays and the overly confident zeal he exudes to "get his man." Nick Mandracchia's Ballplayer is a complicated mixture of immature emotions—sometimes more like a kid in a backlot when swinging his imaginary bat, sometimes like a teenager awkwardly courting a reluctant date, and sometimes clearly a spurned lover who fights to control his anger (and unfortunately cannot always do so).

Some of the decisions either made by director Laura Jane Bailey or dictated by the script of Terry Johnson cause parts of the play to be a bit confusing. This is especially true when there is an explosive event in sound and light at the end of the play. That occurrence is actually much more understandable and impactful in the 1985 film by the same name than it is in this production, and better explains what

happens to the Professor and the Actress near the play's end.

Jonathan Covey provides excellent sound design for the Dragon production, including wonderful radio-sounding music and excited crowd noises of a movie's filming in the streets (i.e., the one where a certain white skirt flies suddenly skyward). Edward Liptzin's equally excellent lighting design includes yellowed light from cheap hotel lamps as well as splattered shadows and sudden spotlights on the carpeted floor to enhance the dreamlike atmosphere of the entire evening. Kathleen Qiu's costumes certainly match how we might imagine the iconic figures before us; and Eric Johnson's scenic design has that 1950s, very modest, urban hotel look—including the deliciously hideous pink walls of the small bathroom of which we catch a glimpse.

The comedy, social commentary, and melodrama of *Insignificance* receive an engaging treatment in Dragon's current production, thanks largely to the astute choices of director Laura Jane Bailey, who helps these four celebrities come to life in ways mostly believable and intriguing in a situation quite fantastic and absurd. Congratulations especially go to Jessica Lea Risco for a stellar performance of which I am sure Norma Jean would approve.

Insignificance, through February 18, 2018, at Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway Street, Redwood City CA. Tickets are available at www.dragonproductions.net or by calling 650-493-2006.

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