

Race, Regarding Arts

By Joanne Engelhardt



Kimberly Wadycki / Dragon Productions Theatre Company

Hannah Mary Keller, Pat Caulfield, Martin Gagen, and Dorian Lockett, from left, in "Race" at The Dragon Theatre in Redwood City, March 16 through April 8, 2018.

David Mamet's 'Race' doesn't seem solid at the Dragon

The play doesn't quite feel complete, and an uneven cast can't make it add up

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Expect to be shaken and stirred by the slight (yet weighty) David Mamet play "Race," which runs through April 8 at Dragon Productions Theatre in Redwood City.

A scant 90 minutes in length, this 2nd Stages Series play plows through some substantial, highly charged topics. And, though one of director Kimberly Ridgeway's stated goals is to get people talking about them afterward, the brevity of Act 1 left most audience members wondering whether a scene had been skipped, but the play itself wasn't discussed.

"Race" was reviewed at the start of the second week of the three-week run, so it's surprising that there were several dropped lines and a somewhat uneven flow to the play as a whole. Without doubt Act 2 made up for some of Act 1's deficiencies, but it still seemed as if the actors were evolving in their roles.

Pat Caulfield plays Jack Lawson and is also listed as producer of "Race" (he admits to being a huge Mamet fan). Though he sometimes walks around the set rather woodenly, Caulfield is obviously the steady founder of the law firm of Lawson and Brown and, as such, his mind does a solid job of sorting out truth from fiction, right from wrong and, frequently, how he can best win a case.

As the other half of the law firm, Henry Brown (a wide-eyed, blustery Dorian Lockett) gets to be more expressive and impulsive, especially when a socially prominent — and rich — white man (a believable turn by Martin Gagen as Charles Strickland) comes to their firm for help. Brown wants no part of it.

Why? Strickland has been accused of raping a black woman. When he tells the lawyers that he's innocent, Brown exclaims "Nobody fucking cares!"

Lawson points out that Strickland already has at least three strikes against him: Hatred, fear, ignorance. "You might have to beg," he says and later advises his staff that "No one has said 'no' to him in 40 years."

But Lawson loves a challenge, and after reading over the police reports, he spots an inconsistency — and a verbal phrase — that he believes can save his

client.

All of this unravels, however, due to the play's fourth character, Susan, a young black woman fresh out of law school who recently joined the firm as a glorified secretary-legal assistant. Hannah Mary Keller is a puzzlement as Susan. She stands rigidly, arms always down at her sides except when carrying a legal pad, and nary a smile crossing her face. Since she often stares up at the ceiling, it's really impossible to know what she's thinking. Her facial expression is inscrutable, offering no clues to her unusual (and frequently devious) behavior. She's just a blank sheet, seemingly with no inner feelings. Unfortunately, this characterization leaves the audience both puzzled and rather indifferent to her.

Also, there's an inconsistency in the dialogue when Lawson tells Susan he wants her to wear a red sequined dress which will be a key element in their defense. He plans to have it made up in a size 2, just like the one worn by the victim. But, although Keller is slender, to anyone who knows anything about women's clothing sizes, it's pretty obvious she's not a size 2.

So while Mamet's play itself is full of bizarre plot twists (and lots of foul language), it lacks the dramatic tension that many of his other works have. It almost seems unfinished.

Dragon's crack production team does an excellent job of making the cozy stage look like a law office complete with a large table strewn with documents and other papers. Lana Palmer's sound is — surprise! — sound, and Jon Gourdine's lighting works well.

All in all, the 2nd Stages production is an interesting, but ultimately somewhat incomplete, experience that could have been so much more.

Email Joanne Engelhardt at JoanneEngelhardt@regardingarts.com