

Dragon Theatre debuts with 'After Ashley'

It's daunting to decide which is more brilliant: The sparkling glass-and-polished concrete lobby of the new Dragon Theatre in downtown Redwood City, or the crackling dialogue of Dragon's first production in the space, "After Ashley."

On Friday's opening night, a sold-out crowd gathered in awe of the new theater itself, as well as for Gina Gionfriddo's enthralling 2004 play that launches a new chapter in Dragon's 13-year history. Gionfriddo has received several drama awards and is a writer for the "Law and Order" television series. Her 2008 play, "Becky Shaw," was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

What makes Gionfriddo's writing (and Dragon's version of it) stand out are the gritty, realistic conversations between the sexually frustrated mother, Ashley (a mercurial, mesmerizing Meredith Hagedorn) and her 14-year-old son, Justin, played with startling honesty and unblinking matter-of-factness by a scrunch-faced Sean Gilvary. Watching these two cavort on a coach, their pretzel-like arms, legs and body parts entangled in a blanket throw -- with mom smothering the young man alternately with love and detached candor (as in "Yes, I hate children" and "You're amazing. You survived me") is unmistakably the best scene in the play.

It's rather unfortunate that scene comes first, although it certainly gets the audience's attention quickly and produces a number of hearty laughs. Later, both the storyline and the dialogue don't have

quite as much bite.

In scene two, the audience learns that Ashley has been brutally raped and killed by a homeless gardener. The rest of the play takes place three years later as her husband and son try to sort through that horrific event. For the dad, this means writing a book and making public appearances. But for Justin, who hasn't been able to process his mother's death, it means years of restlessness, acting out, hostile sarcasm and estrangement.

Eventually Justin picks up a rebellious young college student, Julie (a playful, engrossing Caitlyn Tella). They play a cat-and-mouse game of alternately repelling, then flirting with each other. In the end it's how this young, emotionally deviant pair sorts out their own issues and their compatibility that holds the audience's attention.

Director Dale Albright had a number of challenges in taking on this production, not the least of which was stepping in for another actor two weeks before opening in the key role of Alden, Ashley's husband and Justin's father. He also rehearsed his actors in a theater that was under construction up until almost the last minute. That he managed to learn all of Alden's lines is surprising enough, but he also turned in a performance that has profundity, nuance and, at times, even eloquence. Alden is the Everyman who tries to see the best in people, overlooking, regrettably, the deep-rooted angst of his wife and the mental instability of his son.

The two remaining actors in "After Ashley" (Tim Garcia as the smarmy sex film director Roderick Lord and Evan Michael Schumacher as the smug, righteous television host David Gavin) both seemed like caricatures. Perhaps because director Albright was suddenly thrust into taking over for one of the lead actors, he lacked the bandwidth to induce these two to have more gradation in their performances.

Garcia is suitably creepy, but his characterization seems one-dimensional. The moment he slithers onstage, not unlike the serpent in the Garden of Eden, it's obvious he is a depraved guy. Why not allow him to charm Justin and Julie, then slowly seduce them into doing his bidding? It was just too blatant a gambit. He's also way too young to be that perverted.

At least Schumacher has some moments of authenticity as the pious television host, galvanized (he reminds endlessly) into action after the untimely death of his daughter, whom he rarely saw. Now he capitalizes on the misfortunes of others through his TV show "Profiles in Justice." He recognizes an opportunity for more fame and financial gain by convincing Alden to host a show called "After Ashley" that features re-enactments of sex crimes.

But Schumacher frequently holds his hands artificially in front of his chest and cocks one eye, which tips off the audience that this fellow is only out for himself. His posturing in front of the television cameras is more of the same.

"After Ashley" raises a television set to far more than just an ordinary piece of furniture. It's almost a seventh character. Scattered around the oddly angled new stage are nine TV sets -- three on one side, three in the back and three on the other side. Also, the play's characters watch television: Ashley and Justin watch a psychobabble TV doctor who has written a book, "Life in the Fast Lane" (which Justin thinks sounds like an Eagles song). Later, Alden and Justin are on David's television show and Alden eventually

hosts his own show. And then there are the VHS tapes that Justin and Julie watch (the play takes place in 1999 and continues in 2002, hence the use of VHS rather than DVDs).

Other than the plethora of television sets, the set is minimalistic. There's a couch and chair in Ashley's living room, a small bar for the bar scene, a chair and sleeping bag in Justin's apartment. But then, this play is so not about the décor. Sound was excellent, thanks to sound and video designer Rebecca Longworth, and Lisa Claybaugh's costumes seemed quite appropriate. However, it looked as if Alden's sports coat was too large for him, possibly because Albright took over for another actor of a different size.

Overall, the Dragon production team and cast overcame a lot of difficulties to put together a performance that is definitely absorbing, piercing and sometimes compelling.

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Theater

What: "After Ashley"

Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway, Redwood City

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays; through Feb. 17

Tickets: \$15-\$30; 650-493-2006 or www.dragonproductions.net