

A Good Reed Review



By Ande Jacobson

Edna the Dragon roars again as Dragon Theatre Productions opens its 2013 season in its new home in Redwood City with Gina Gionfriddo's *After Ashley*. The show is a dark satire that takes biting stabs at reality and true crime television as the story unfolds. Be aware, this production contains strong language, adult situations, and sexual content not appropriate for young children.

The plot chronicles events leading up to, and the aftermath of, the murder of Ashley Hammond (Meredith Hagedorn); an art teacher, wife, and mother caught in an unhappy, unfulfilled existence. She's close to her son Justin (Sean Gilvery) and almost estranged from her ultra-liberal husband Alden (Director Dale Albright), except that she can't bring herself to divorce him. After her murder, Alden and Justin are at odds in the midst of the media blitz that follows, each having their own perspective of the events' occurrence.

TV producer David Gavin (Evan Michael Schumacher) draws Alden into the limelight after Alden's book "After Ashley" is published, offering him his own show of the same name. After the Hammonds move from Maryland to Florida to work on the show, Justin hooks up with a Goth college student named Julie Bell (Caitlyn Tella). Much later, we meet Roderick Lord (Tim Garcia), a debauched "puppet-master" from Ashley's adventures that Justin seeks out. As written, the play's strongest scenes are the opening and the latter parts of Act 2. In between, there's a bit too much repetition and angst, although it's necessary to set up the finale.

The opening is worth the price of admission and is very natural amidst some very funny, yet disturbing exchanges. Before the murder, Ashley is trying to have a frank discussion with her son. Justin is clearly uncomfortable with the subject evidenced by Gilvery's constant motion as he contorts himself into various yoga-like positions on the couch and plays with his t-shirt and blanket. Hagedorn uses this to her advantage grabbing his leg, or whatever piece of him is close by, as she talks. Ashley wants to have the "sex talk" with Justin but then confides her troubles to him. Eventually Justin tells her "I can't really be your girlfriend" and urges her to go out and do something, although the something that she ends up doing isn't revealed until very late in Act 2.

By contrast, Albright's Alden is in another place, clearly disconnected from Ashley's problems and totally focused on his own causes. Albright plays the self absorbed, yet progressive Alden to a tee. He appears comfortable in his own skin; although we quickly realize that his character is blind to anything he doesn't want to see. Albright and Hagedorn only have one scene together, but they make a strong impression, their characters bickering from start to finish. As husband and wife, they keep their distance, making it clear their marriage is in trouble.

Albright and Gilvery work well together, also keeping a physical distance indicative of the fractured relationship their characters maintain. Their verbal sparring is quick and digs deep as Justin attacks and Alden deflects anything that doesn't fit his deluded view of reality. Gilvery often paces while talking with Albright, making Justin's discomfort with Alden's position very clear.

Schumacher is actually the youngest in the cast, but he's playing much older. He's got the right tone for David, bringing his character's magniloquence to bear as he capitalizes on a family tragedy for personal gain. His comportment is slightly stiff, and he comes off as suitably menacing when he gets in Justin's face, threatening him not to disrupt the big, upcoming event. While his physicality is appropriate for his character, he's a little shaky on some of his lines either reordering or dropping a few key parts.

Tella is very credible as Julie, running from being indignant at Justin's accusations about her being a "victim groupie" to a concerned friend making a real connection with him. She's natural in her demeanor and line delivery, and she and Gilvery share a palpable closeness in their interactions. While Julie is deep and multifaceted, Garcia plays Roderick as pure satire, so sleazy, you feel a little slimy just watching him. Reactions from Gilvery and Tella cement the discomfort the audience should feel when Garcia is on

stage.

Margaret Toomey's set design is simple and clean, requiring minimal movement between locations. Nine televisions with active screens visible to the audience adorn three, 3-set clusters stage right, stage left, and upstage center. These stay fixed throughout the performance (though they seem to favor viewing from house left), and the pictures change to match the situation. A smaller TV downstage center faces upstage in two of the locations. The furnishings for the Hammond's living room, television studio, Justin's apartment, bar, Ashley House, and a lake are simple and easily moved. The set changes are executed under rock music either favored by Ashley, or by Julie. Two examples of the music used include Joe Jackson's "It's Different for Girls" and Eminem's "Stan", which are played as part of sound (and video) designer Rebecca Longworth's soundtrack. Both of the aforementioned songs not only are played but are discussed as key plot points.

As for the physical surroundings, the performance space is bigger than before and is now a diamond shape creating some blocking challenges. In particular, an actor placed downstage center faces the potentially unintended prospect of addressing many members in the house with his profile, or the back of his head, decreasing his impact. This is especially noticeable during one of Schumacher's "heartfelt" monologues.

The house too is larger, seating 75 on the ground floor with a small, enclosed VIP box hovering above. The main floor is also much flatter with the first two (of four) rows on the same level. The chairs are bigger as well, so much so that shorter patrons may have to choose between sitting back in their seats or putting their feet flat on the floor. Patrons may want to bring a jacket as the air conditioning works well to keep it cool even when the theatre fills up. While the ambient lighting in the house is a bit dark for comfortably reading the program at your seat, the lobby is bright and cozy, though the lobby's coziness caused the opening night reception to bleed out onto the sidewalk to accommodate the crowd. Lastly, though it didn't seem possible, the restrooms are noticeably farther away from the lobby and auditorium than they were in the old space.

After Ashley won't appeal to all audiences, but this is a strong production that is worthy of carrying on the Dragon tradition in its new home.

What: Gina Gionfriddo's *After Ashley*

Where: Dragon Productions Theatre located at: 2120 Broadway Street, Redwood City,

CA 94063.

When: Thursdays – Sundays through 17 February 2012

See <http://www.dragonproductions.net> or call 650-493-2006 for more information.

(Photo Credit: James Kasyan)

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