

Long on laughs

Wickedly funny meta-theater piece 'Anton' is not just for theater people

by Jeanie K. Smith

"Anton in Show Business" by Jane Martin is one of those plays that theater people love, because it's about theater and the importance of keeping it alive in our culture. It's also wickedly funny, irreverent, sexy and satirical, skewering all kinds of theater types even while rather lovingly depicting the crazy life of the artist.

Directed by Stephen Maddox, the current production playing at the Dragon Theatre in Palo Alto captures both the humor and the heart of the piece, delivering guffaws and grace, in spite of a few missteps.

From the outset we follow two wanna-be actresses: Casey Mulgraw (Jennifer Jane Parsons), a veteran of more than 200 off-off-Broadway shows still struggling to find her stardom; and Lisabette Cartwright (Meredith Hagedorn), a naive newcomer fresh out of a college theater program with stars in her eyes. The two audition for an unlikely production — Chekhov's "Three Sisters" is slated to play in San Antonio, Texas, as a vehicle for soap opera star Holly Seabe (Kristen Lo).

The audition is a farce, but Holly insists on the girls being hired, so the three women fly to Texas for rehearsals. Along the way we meet stage managers, producers, directors and more, as the actresses navigate their way through a wacky and unpredictable process. They wonder, as we do, how any "Art" manages to happen in such an unstable world, where funding is shaky and the work goes unappreciated.

Lonnie Genelle, as a kind of uber-stage manager, notes in the prologue that the play is an homage to Thornton Wilder, most famously the playwright of perhaps the most famous American play, "Our Town." We begin to understand this better as the play amiably shuffles between the staged narrative and a meta-narrative when the actors act like "themselves" in order to comment on the action and argue with an audience member (Lauren Burniges).

The play also reflects on the current lamentable state of American theater as a means of commenting on the American psyche, the lack of value we place on the arts, and the insane and unreal world of Hollywood. This is much like "Our Town," where we find the universal in the specific and vernacular.

Lisabette, the youngest and most hopeful of the characters, has the last word, with a lyrical and moving vision, leaving the audience to continue the conversation beyond the curtain calls. Raucously funny and a little raunchy at times, the piece rises to its role model by the end, challenging us to consider the fate of theater in the 21st century.

The ensemble actors play various supporting roles. Genelle, for example, plays at least seven characters, showing chameleon versatility. Vera Sloan plays a beleaguered artistic director, a casting director and a male country-western star cast as Chekhov's Colonel philosopher, Vershinin. Her range is remarkable and each character is utterly believable. Mary Horne plays several men, including the Russian director obsessed with Chekhov and method acting. Burniges stands up and stands out as a not-so-innocent bystander.

The three lead actresses — Lo, Parsons and Hagedorn — are all wonderful in their roles, capable of comedy as well as the requisite melancholy of Chekhov. It's terrific fun to watch them interact with each other and the ensemble. Their instincts are outstanding.

There are a few times when the interpretation is off, or the comedy is lacking because of misdirection. Genelle's tobacco mogul, for example, needs a sickness that isn't there; and Horne's two directors are too similar in tone and demeanor. Occasionally a scene misses its emotional arc so that the point is hard to follow.

Costuming everyone in black may have seemed like a good idea in theory, but it negates any character definition and actually makes the actors hard to see.

The set design by Ron Gasparinetti fulfills the script's idea of opening the stage to the back walls, but it's a faux wall, and I wondered why they didn't open to the actual back walls. The clever upstage doors were a nice effect, although under-utilized.

But the talent on stage ultimately brings the show to life, in spite of these minor flaws, to deliver humor, satire and a thoughtful message.—

What: "Anton in Show Business," by Jane Martin, presented by Dragon Productions

Where: Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St., Palo Alto

When: Through May 23, with 8 p.m. shows Thursday through Saturday and 2 p.m. matinees on Sundays

Cost: Tickets are \$16-\$20.

Info: Go to www.dragonproductions.net or call 650-493-2006.