

Stripped-down theater

Gifted actors peel back the layers to uncover secrets in compelling  
'Brilliant Traces'

by Kevin Kirby

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Henry has gone to great lengths to be alone. His home — an isolated cabin in Alaska with rough-milled planking on the walls and snow drifted nearly to the top of the windows — contains a narrow bed, a small table with a single chair, a sink, an oven, a few cupboards, and little else. There is nothing to suggest that he expects or welcomes company.

Naturally, then, company is what he gets, in the form of Rosannah. Rosannah bursts through Henry's door in the middle of the night, starving and half-frozen, having trudged a mile from her broken-down car in a mounting snowstorm . . . in her wedding dress. As Henry watches, utterly unresponsive, she downs several shots of whiskey, provides a breathless, disjointed narrative of her journey, and then passes out on his floor.

Thus begins "Brilliant Traces," a one-act play by Cindy Lou Johnson, now running at Dragon Productions' 40-seat Palo Alto theater. This is an ideal venue for a play like this, and an ideal play for the venue. Rather than watching the action through an invisible "fourth wall," the audience experiences this show almost as though they too were enclosed within the cabin's four walls, a feeling that is enhanced by the sounds of swirling wind emanating from the back of the theater. The bleakness of Henry's existence suffuses the room.

Henry and Rosanne are played by Tom Gough and Meredith Hagedorn, under the direction of John Aney, who is also credited for the set and sound design. The success of this piece is entirely dependent on the skills and experience of these three people, and thankfully they are up to the task.

Following Rosannah's collapse, Henry — motionless and silent up to this point — rouses himself and begins doing what needs to be done. His actions are deliberate and unhurried, as though he were a not-quite-warm-blooded creature intent on conserving its strength. He lifts his unconscious visitor and carries her to the bed. He removes her stockings and the wedding gown. And finally, still in silence and with no hint of emotion showing on his face, he dampens a cloth and washes her exposed limbs.

The simplicity and ambiguity of his actions are as riveting as they are creepy. Gough maintains this flat affect as Henry settles himself at the table with Rosannah's discarded satin slippers in hand, until finally, as the lights fade on the scene, he begins inexplicably to sob.

The act of undressing Rosannah at the end of scene one is a foreshadowing; everything that follows in Johnson's play is the psychological equivalent of that act, a kind of psychoanalytic striptease de deux, in which the characters' scars and bruises and bone-white fears are ultimately revealed. And it is here that the collective experience of Gough, Hagedorn and Aney is crucial, for — as with a real striptease — the effectiveness of the play's long final

scene relies on timing, on finesse, on the tantalizing glimpse of secrets yet to be uncovered.

And these characters certainly have secrets to uncover. It is soon evident that both are refugees from the truths of their lives. Trapped in this confined space by a raging blizzard, neither is content to let the other's secrets remain buried.

Even though the revelations (especially in Rosannah's case) may not fully satisfy after the protracted build-up, and even though the abrupt cathartic resolution of Johnson's script may feel contrived, it is fascinating watching the two actors maneuver, trying new tactics to get past each other's defenses. Hagedorn is particularly good at this; one can read the thought process in her eyes each time her questions trigger Henry's seemingly disproportionate reactions and she falls back to regroup.

Gough, in turn, gives a masterfully nuanced performance as a complex man seeking solace in a simple existence. His sentences are short and flat, delivered in a voice that has grown rough with disuse. His tone is at times desperately level, as he struggles to contain emotions and memories that threaten to "tear everything to shreds."

The pair's inner turmoil is, of course, mirrored by the violence of the white-out swirling about the cabin. With this in mind, the show could benefit by raising the volume on the sound effects. At the very least, an occasional window-rattling gust would reinforce the fact that the two are trapped for the duration, helping to create an atmosphere in which their emotional equilibrium is stretched to the breaking point.

The show's other pervasive flaw is also atmospheric: The cabin never seems cold enough. Unless Henry's cabin is far better weather-sealed than it looks, one would expect a lingering chill in places, yet there is little in either actor's manner to suggest this. Even in the opening scene, when Hagedorn bursts in after trekking through the snow in satin slippers, there is no truly visceral sense of cold.

Minor details aside, Dragon's "Brilliant Traces" is well-paced, well-directed, and well-acted. It's an excellent example of the kind of intimate, challenging theater that the company does best.

The show closes this Sunday; those wishing to see this intriguing drama are advised to reserve tickets soon.

What: "Brilliant Traces," presented by Dragon Productions Theatre Company

Where: Dragon Theatre, 539 Alma St., Palo Alto

When: Tonight and Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2, closing this weekend

Cost: \$15 general, \$10 for students and seniors.

Info: Call 650-493-2006 or go to [www.dragonproductions.net](http://www.dragonproductions.net)