

Palo Alto's 'Country Club' stylish, well-acted fun

By Joanne Englehardt

Correspondent

Article Created: 04/24/2008 12:13:59 AM PDT

"The Country Club," a comedy with some serious undertones by Douglas Carter Beane, centers around a group of yuppies who are rich, spoiled and adrift — and spoofed and toyed with by the playwright.

The production, which continues through May 11 at the Dragon Productions theatre in Palo Alto, is set in the "cub" room of an exclusive Wyomissing, Pa. (yes, there is such a town and Beane once lived there) country club. The plot follows the shallow lives of seven 30ish friends from New Year's Eve 1998 through Christmas 1999.

Director Meredith Hagedorn keeps things moving at a fast pace — and with a good measure of laughs from Beane's campy script. As Soos, Katie Anderson has a mercurial face that darts through every emotion from ecstasy to agony and back again. Soos returns to Wyomissing from California for a two-week visit after her marriage fails. But soon she's drawn into the lives of her old country club chums and haplessly falls in love (again) with Zip (Jack Starr), a free spirit who enjoys chasing and sleeping with almost any female he meets.

That includes Chloe (El Beh), who is first the fiancée, then the wife of his best friend, Hutch (Michael Champlin).

Rounding out the cast are Mary Lou Torre as self-centered Froggy; Froggy's elitist, oh-so-bored husband Bri (Danny Martin); and Pooker (Sarah Cook), whose primary functions seem to be to provide a centering point and to bitch (but not do anything) about life in general.

Torre's large, expressive eyes belie her tiny stature — and can she ever talk. Her character is a nonstop chatter machine. In her first scene, Froggy unwittingly demonstrates how much she's in love with her own voice by describing her six-months-ago wedding in microscopic detail.

Without spoiling the story, suffice to say that Soos and Zip become involved for a few months before he wanders off after Chloe. The whole thing comes to a climax when Soos rats out Zip and Chloe in front of Hutch and the others at Thanksgiving. The final scene, at Christmastime, is too superficial.

Set designer Ron Gasparinetti has created a stylish, modernistic room that, with a minimum of alteration, works for every scene. The well-equipped (and frequently used) bar sports a front panel that changes from "New Year's Eve" to "St. Patrick's Day" to "Halloween."

But it's Beane's words that really stand out in this production. For example, when Soos and Pooker first get together on New Year's Eve, Soos tries to remember what certain phrases mean in WASPish "country club" language.

Soos: "How do you say someone is Jewish?" Pooker: "What a character." Soos: "How do you say someone is black?" Pooker: — ... so well-spoken." Regrettably, a few of the actors (Beh, Champlin and, to some extent, Starr) never quite inhabit their characters. Instead of being real people, they seem more like one-dimensional cutouts.

Overall, however, this is a play that will make you laugh as well as look at the absurdity of living a life unfulfilled. Hagedorn has consistently brought solid, thoughtful productions into her tiny theatre just off University Avenue. What's surprising is that every seat isn't filled for each performance. A stable local theatre company is sorely needed in this city, which justifiably prides itself on having active, liberal and well-educated residents.

So, Palo Alto (and surrounding cities): Get off your duff and go support this theatre. It's good, it's a bargain — and it's right in your own back yard.

Theater review

□ WHAT: Dragon Productions' "The Country Club"

□ WHERE: 535 Alma St.,

Palo Alto

□ WHEN: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays through May 10; 2 p.m. Sundays through May 11

□ TICKETS: \$18 general, \$13 students and seniors, Thursdays and Sundays; \$20 general, \$15 students and seniors, Fridays-Saturdays; 650-493-2006, www.dragonproductions.net