

## A haunting tale

*In Dragon's well-cast 'Burn This,' four characters try to find their way*

by Kevin Kirby

Written by Lanford Wilson in the mid-1980s and currently in production at Dragon Theatre, "Burn This" is the story of four people finding their way in the aftermath of an untimely death. A week prior to the play's opening scene, Robbie, a dynamic young dancer in New York City, drowns in a freak boating accident, along with his lover, Dominic.

Left behind are his roommates, Anna (a fellow dancer) and Larry (a rather fey cog in the Madison Avenue advertising machine), as well as his older brother Pale, an explosive, substance-abusing restaurateur from New Jersey. Also caught up in the turmoil is Anna's tepid love interest, Burton, an old-moneyed, prep-schooled narcissist who supplements his fortune by writing schlocky sci-fi screenplays.

Dragon's production is competently directed by Dale Albright, who, for good or ill, has chosen to de-emphasize the play's '80s roots. Costumes, hairstyles and decor are all period-neutral. If the characters didn't keep talking about snorting coke, we could almost believe the play was contemporary.

Albright has cast the show well and has gotten measured performances from his actors. Sarah Kate Anderson's Anna is quietly haunted and creatively blocked by the loss of her longtime friend and collaborator. Her vulnerability is obvious but not overstated. As Larry, Danny Martin is gay enough to make the point without descending into caricature.

Jeff Clarke seems to struggle a bit with Burton in Act I, as Wilson has given him a rambling, self-involved, wildly irrelevant monologue with which to start the show — all about the Canadian tundra, screenwriting and the love lives of 18th-century whalers. Since we've barely met the character and are still trying to orient ourselves to the plot, we're not quite sure what to make of all this. Clarke's performance feels more grounded in Act II, when it appears that his love life may become an indirect casualty of Robbie's boating accident.

Matthew Lai faces a similar challenge as Pale. Arriving unannounced at 5 a.m. and pounding on the door until a half-asleep Anna lets him in, he fills his first few minutes on stage with a furious, unrelenting, coked-up rant about parking in the city. But Pale's tirade — and everything that comes after — is driven by grief and fear transmuted into anger. Lai taps into the depth of Pale's distress, and the resulting performance is electrifying and dangerous.

When Pale (who claims always to be too hot — one of several "burning" references in Wilson's script) begins peeling off layers of clothing in front of a barely dressed Anna, we sense where this is going. Lai and Anderson handle the physical aspects of the ensuing seduction beautifully, with a candor not often achieved by actors in non-professional theater.

The question that remains, of course, is what this encounter means for Pale and Anna. Is each clinging to the other merely as a means of staying connected to Robbie, or is there something more? The story plays out somewhat predictably, but Albright and the Dragon cast never let it look like a foregone conclusion.

In the four years since Dragon Productions moved into its current 40-seat house in downtown Palo Alto, Artistic Director Meredith Hagedorn has been exceptionally adept at choosing plays that are appropriate for the venue: plays that benefit from the intimate scale of the space and that can be successfully mounted without enormous sets or huge crowds of actors.

Even Hagedorn's more ambitious choices have generally succeeded, due in no small part to the work of Ray Gasparinetti, the company's most frequent scenic designer. Gasparinetti has pulled off the improbable more than once, as when he built an entire restaurant kitchen and dining area on Dragon's tiny stage for Tina Howe's "Art of Dining." This time around, though, Hagedorn has chosen a play that wants a more spacious set than Gasparinetti can deliver.

This may seem like an odd criticism. After all, the cast of "Burn This" numbers only four, and there is only one brief scene in which all of them are on stage simultaneously. Further, the closeness of Dragon's quarters puts the subtleties of the characters' emotional journeys right in the laps of the audience — indeed, in this intimate space, Lai and Anderson can devastate us with the tiniest of gestures.

On a purely utilitarian level, the set works. The actors have a couch to sit on, a refrigerator to rummage in, windows to stare out of. Gasparinetti does his best to suggest the high ceilings and open beams of a New York loft, but on a visceral level it just doesn't work. Looking at a kitchen, dining area and living room crammed into 300 square feet, bordered by dark windows, we feel that we are in a dingy studio, not a cavernous bohemian loft in which — as Anna explains — she and Robbie have left most of the space empty so that they can dance.

Worse yet, the set cramps the playwright's metaphors. Wilson is not shy about doling out obvious symbolism to illuminate the play's themes. One recurring image, present both in Burton's description of his latest screenplay and in Anna's explanation of the choreographer's art — "You have bodies, space ... distance, relationships ..." — involves isolated individuals trying to make connections across the vast gulfs that separate us all. Every character in the show is, in some way, involved in this same pursuit, but with all of them sitting right on top of each other it's hard to *feel* it. There's simply no room for the metaphor to echo and magnify.

It's a larger problem than one might imagine, but it's certainly not enough to scuttle the performance. Anderson and Lai turn in admirable work and are well supported by Martin and Clarke. All in all, "Burn This" is a solid evening of theater and a nice addition to Dragon's 10th anniversary season.

**What: "Burn This," a Lanford Wilson play presented by Dragon Productions**

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

**When: Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m., through April 4**

**Cost: \$20 general admission, \$16 for students and seniors**