

## 'Delicate Balance' indeed

By Joanne Engelhardt

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If you prefer plays tied up with ribbon in neat little packages, then anything written by Edward Albee is probably not your cup of tea.

But if you want a challenging evening of theatre, one filled with frustrating, but memorable and thrilling words and characters, then Dragon Productions' current offering, "A Delicate Balance" is something to savor.

Most people remember Albee as the playwright of the widely acclaimed "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" That play and "Balance" have several things in common, primarily: The people aren't really very nice. In fact, most of the time they're downright unpleasant. The sextet in this drama has a few redeeming qualities, but also many character traits that make you want to dash to the other side of the street if you see one of them approach.

Albee's sometimes-eclectic style requires the audience to do a lot of mental gymnastics. As the play opens, uptight, unemotional Agnes (Mary Horne) considers the possibility that she might go "quite mad" someday. Yet she and her stoic husband, Tobias (Dan Roach), are merely sitting in their living room, nonchalantly enjoying after-dinner drinks, looking for all the world like a contented upper-class couple.

But Albee's words rip through that illusion quickly. Agnes' heaviest burden is her sister Claire (a marvelously elastic Monica Cappuccini), who lives with them and who seemingly has no

other desire in life than to drink herself silly every night. Oh, yes: She has a death wish for dear sister Agnes and a not-so-subtle amorous interest in Tobias.

Into this mélange comes four-times married daughter, Julia (played with precisely the right mix of spunk and vinegar by Rachel Joseph). Julia's latest marriage is falling apart, and "" despite the fact she's 36 years old "" she has nowhere to go but home to mommy and daddy.

But wait "" there's more! The most mysterious part of "Balance" comes when Agnes and Tobias' best friends, Edna (Shareen Merriam) and Harry (Bill C. Jones) show up, driven from their own home by an unknown terror (referred to later by Agnes as a "plague"). Merriam is off-putting with her averted eyes and peculiar hand-wringing movements, but Jones feels right at home in Harry's skin.

Yet their decision to move into the home of their best friends due to this unexplained fear stretches the limits of belief for the audience. One needs a clearer understanding of why they assume moving in permanently with Agnes and Tobias is included within the boundaries of friendship.

As the somewhat tyrannical head of her household, Horne has the difficult challenge of being both drill sergeant and nanny to "keep it from falling apart" as she, herself, proclaims. She adeptly mixes a steely exterior with a wisp of kindness, and then becomes the play-ending optimist when she says, after Edna and Harry's awkward departure, "Well, they're safely gone" and we'll all forget "quite soon. Come now; we can begin the day."

Roach seems rather lifeless in Act 1, quietly playing the pacifier as if nothing happening around him concerns him. But in the second act he lets out the

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stops in an emotional, conflicted scene with Harry.

The extremely simple set, Agnes and Tobias' library-living room, has more liquor bottles than a bar "" alcohol flows freely in this household. But the back "wall" of gold curtains seems wrong. A real wall with hallways leading to the rest of the house might have given this play some needed grounding.

Director Arden Thomas, a drama doctoral candidate at Stanford University, has pulled some strong performances from her actors, in particular, Cappuccini who completely commands your attention whenever she's on stage. Her voice has such humanity, yet her poignant eyes reveal that she is a lost soul.

"Balance" often asks more questions than it answers, but then, like many of Albee's works, it's best to appreciate his words and the good efforts of the actors.

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