

Dragon breathes fire into Steve Martin's 'Underpants'
By Keith Kreitman, CONTRIBUTOR

OCCASIONALLY, I review a play I believe could be given as a masters class in acting. "The Underpants," with an ensemble of six actors in pitch-perfect characterizations at Dragon Productions in Palo Alto, is one of these.

The show, a 1910 play by German playwright Carl Sternheim adapted by movieland's Steve Martin, originally was designed as a satire of the German middle class. Martin updated the theme by emphasizing gender relations and short-time fame that comes to some in the modern era.

In Dusseldorf, Germany, in 1910, those moments of fame come to Louise Maske (Shannon Stowe), when her underpants accidentally drop to her ankles while she's watching the emperor march down a boulevard.

The accident evokes moments of despair for her husband, Theo (Ray Renati), a minor government bureaucrat who fears he might lose his job as a result of the publicity. That doesn't happen, but it does result in two observers of the event applying for a room the Maskes' have for rent, with only seduction in mind.

The first is a flamboyant and effete poet Versati (Kalon Thibodeaux). Also there's barber Cohen (Blake Maxam), who conceals his Jewishness from the burly, bull-headed nationalistic Theo by spelling his name with a K instead of a C. Greed leads Theo to accept both as tenants by splitting the room with a screen. Louise, a virgin at marriage who remains faithful to her husband, has become sexually frustrated because Theo doesn't want children until they accumulate enough capital.

Meanwhile, the nosey upstairs neighbor Gertrude Deuter (Mary Lou Torre), who knows of Louise's frustrations, < and of the flattering attention she's receiving from the new tenants < encourages her to grab a chance for a romantic affair. While Versati's prime motive is seduction, Cohen's is to thwart him and have Louise for himself. Meanwhile, clueless Theo doesn't suspect a thing.

"The Underpants" is not a great play, nor does it have an abundance of Martin's patented off-the-wall humor, but it does provide a great vehicle for actors, and director Mike Reynolds nicely paces the action tightly.

Thibodeaux, a relative newcomer to the Bay Area, is simply brilliant in the Versati role. His mannerisms, his aloof verbal inflections and his keenly honed body and hand movements are a delight. The others are perfect in their roles, too. Beautiful Stowe is her usual, sexy, radiant self; Renati is properly brutish, nationalist and clueless; Maxam does a great job of half-concealing his ethnicity and Torre could ace the role of the busybody Yente in "Fiddler on the Roof." Bob May is funny in his brief role as the tense and unsociable scientist Klingelehoff, who also seeks lodgings at the Maske house.

A word needs to be said for designer Fred Sharkey, for his wonderfully appropriate set of a neat German apartment of the early 20th century.

"The Underpants" is the sort of play that works best in smaller, more intimate theaters that are popping up in the area. Dragon Productions is hitting its stride as a purveyor of that kind of quality theater.