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Spicy performances save 'Gingerbread'

By Keith Kreitman, CONTRIBUTOR
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IN THE physical world, oil and water do not mix. And, in theater, tragedy and comedy do not mix, either. A case in point is "The Gingerbread Lady," by Neil Simon, as it swirls around on the Dragon Theatre stage in Palo Alto.

However, the direction by Dave Sikula, performances by the cast and even the set by Cy Eaton are first rate and prove another theatrical verity: A good production can overcome a poor play.

No show person in the past century, except perhaps Groucho Marx or Charlie Chaplin, has been so able to view commonplace, everyday phenomena in such unique ways as Simon does.

That was Simon's main shtick when he was writing one-liners and situation playlets for successful TV shows. That was before he moved on to become equally famous for his serious works for the stage.

In this play, he was apparently in transition, taking the stuff of modern tragedy — the dysfunction of relationships and substance addiction — mixing it on the stage with his famed one-liners and putting it on the market as a new palliative.

As a result, it tastes rather strange, and the audience suffers from side effects as it reacts like an emotional yo-yo, wondering whether to cry at the genuine tragedy or crack up at the rapid-fire, witty one liners. Even though those lines are dated and overused, it is not an unattractive mixture.

If you like one-liners, I'll give you this: The plot is daughter and friends try to save a relapsing alcoholic from herself.

An old war horse of a plot, for sure, so, why did I like it? Because of the performances: Diane Tascas, who plays the 43-year-old alcoholic entertainer Evy Meara, wouldn't know how to give anything but a great performance in any genre from any era, and she comes through again, saving the last vestiges of dignity in her lush of a character.

I also liked the play because of 15-year-old Vivian Cook, who is terrific as Evy's strong-minded, 17-year-old daughter, Polly, determined to save her mother from another slide into nowhere.

There are also two very strong performances from actors playing Evy's best friends. Carolyn Power is the self-absorbed, fading beauty Toby Landau and Martin Gagen is Jimmy Perry, a 40ish gay and frustrated stage actor.

Those are the reasons. You will bask in the warmth of their stormy relationships. In this sense, Simon's play is redeemed.

James Allen Brewer is Lou Tanner, Evy's former lover, who by abandoning her for a younger woman, had sent Evy off on her most recent trip into alcoholic oblivion.

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Alex Fiore is the delivery boy Manuel, who has some funny bits trying to collect in advance for delivered groceries.

The most memorable segments include Tascas slipping into an alcoholic haze so slowly and so nuanced she never crosses the line into the image of a "drunken babe."

Power breaks you up in one long piece of dialogue where she narrates her transition from attractive and desirable high school beauty to the middle-age realization that no amount of cosmetic aid will preserve a beautiful, fading flower.

Another memorable scene is when you witness Gagen's dismay as he looks into the darkness of the future and sees an aging actor who has never made it and is at the end of the line.

"The Gingerbread lady" is not exactly a fun Simon show like "The Odd Couple," but very good performances save this one.

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