

Excellent acting, eccentric script

'Love Song' makes light music

by Jeanie K. Smith

Palo Alto is culture-rich, filled with entertainment choices. One of these riches is the tiny downtown Dragon Theatre, where contemporary works that the bigger theaters won't do can be undertaken.

The Dragon's latest offering, "Love Song" by John Kolvenbach, is a great case in point: a relatively unknown play by an unknown playwright that deserves airing. Nominated for an Olivier award in 2007, it's a whimsical look at love, sanity and the alienation of modern life, a quirky romantic comedy for our times.

Four fantastic actors bring this wacky little play to life. After an intriguing look at a man in a bare room (Ron Talbot as Beane) struggling with a stubborn pole lamp, we meet Joan (Pidge Meade) and her husband, Harry (Dan Kapler), arguing about Joan's latest office axe-swing against a young intern. Beane's entrance into their apartment is unremarked upon to the point of the audience's wondering if he is in fact invisible, until Joan and Harry finally bring him into their discussion.

Turns out Beane is Joan's brother, and a bit ... well, odd, and proceeds to make mincemeat of Harry's pet personality test. After frustrating the hell out of Harry, Beane returns to his lonely room, only to discover he's being burglarized — by an attractive Goth-like burglar, Molly (Meredith Hagedorn), who enjoys teasing her victims before absconding with all their stuff. When she leaves, we recognize the signs in Beane — he's smitten.

How the play unfolds from there I cannot reveal; suffice to say it's intriguing and includes a couple of twists. The love scenes are truly original, but resonant and sweet. The dialogue mostly rings true, although the conversation is occasionally hard to follow. In some cases, it's difficult to know if confusion rests on the play or a directorial choice. The first half is stronger than the second, and the plot seems a bit hole-ly, but it's compelling enough to warrant a discussion over cocktails after the show.

We're reminded of life's priorities, in an unlikely fashion, and can relate to the need for family and love. Does insanity mitigate matters of the heart? Should it? When does reality really count?

Mostly, the acting makes up for any deficiencies in the script. These four performers are terrific, each bringing energy and color to wonderfully novel characters. Meade and Kapler have great chemistry as the married couple who have grown a little weary in the marriage but who still love each other. Hagedorn gets to have wild, zany fun as the Goth girl. And Talbot's baleful Beane is strangely loveable, in spite (or because of?) his peculiar nature. Whether or not he's insane is martini fodder.

The set by Ron Gasparinetti makes good use of the small stage, creating two separate apartments and still having space for a restaurant scene. Beane's room is especially evocative, with the lamp that has a life of its own; Steve Shumway's lighting design no doubt also has much to do with the success of defining the spaces and animating the lamp. Costumes by Rosie Ricca do a good job of delineating character.

So treat yourself to an evening of local theater in an intimate setting, imagine you're in SoHo enjoying an Off-Off-Off-Broadway performance, and pat yourself on the back for supporting one of our cultural riches. You'll be a better person for it, and maybe hug your sweetheart a little tighter.

What: "Love Song" by John Kolvenbach, presented by Dragon Productions

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

When: Through Oct. 3, with 8 p.m. shows Thursday through Saturday and 2 p.m. matinees on Sundays

Cost: Tickets are \$10-\$25.

Info: Go to www.dragonproductions.net or call 650-493-2006.