

A Good Reed Review

By Ande Jacobson

March, written by Sharyn Rothstein, marks the end of an era as the little Dragon roars one last time in its cozy Palo Alto home. Starting as a group of nomadic thespians in 1999, Dragon Productions Theatre Company settled into its Alma Street space in 2006. After this production seven seasons later, Dragon will be moving to Redwood City to usher in the 2013 season, but first let us look at the finale to 2012.

The worlds of online gaming are almost unlimited, most full of impressive graphics bringing to life worlds of incredible beauty and/or frightful challenges that can be safely explored from one's home computer. Visit an advanced outpost on a far off planet, fly on the back of a mythical creature above the mountains and waterfalls of an ancient world, or battle an "eight-headed, prehistoric polar bear with flying teeth and poison saliva". The characters one can create (possibly with a bit of practice to master the controls) are as varied as the worlds they inhabit, and the online communities are widespread, so a player can meet and play with people from across town or across the globe.

Should parents worry about all the time their teenager spends online playing *Second Life*, *Everquest*, or any of the host of other online games? Perhaps, but then again, sometimes the friendships forged online can be lasting and supportive, so it might be worth looking a little deeper before dismissing their value out of hand.

March provides an absorbing take on family life and points out some of the good that can come from the internet. The story follows 14-year-old Eva Lucia "Lucy" Perez (Rasika Raghavan) and 15-year-old Michael Meltzer (Sam Bertken) through their encounters online in the virtual world of Eden and in real life as they each deal with their own dysfunctional families.

Lucy is being smothered by her mother Eva (Leticia Duarte) while her father Manny (Glenn Havlan) distances himself with attachment issues of his own. Eva turns to Lucy as her sole focus in life, rarely letting her leave the house. The two often argue rather vehemently as Lucy struggles to break the emotional bonds her mother uses to restrain her. Unable to escape in the real world, she seeks refuge in the virtual world of Eden through her avatar Roxanna.

Michael's brother Benjamin (David Madwin) is afflicted with mental illness, and their

parents Neil (George Mauro) and Lilian (Janine Evans) are ill-equipped to deal with this challenge. Because of the attention his parents give to Benny, Michael feels left out and becomes Lucas in Eden, a world that offers solace and which he understands better than real life. Together, Roxanna and Lucas begin a quest to battle monsters and explore, but reality keeps interrupting.

Director Lennon Smith was drawn to the authenticity in the voicing of the play as it realistically portrays two teens desperate to establish their own unique identities amidst the turmoil of their respective family lives. She's right, much of the dialog works, and the "kids" are all consummate actors, especially in scenes together.

Raghavan and Bertken have good chemistry and play convincing teenagers. Their awkwardness upon first meeting along with the subsequent development of their friendship is smooth and believable, despite their real age difference. In Eden, their movements are robotic, making it clear that they are animated characters though there are some times in "real life" where it almost appears that Raghavan forgets which world she's in and sometimes maintains a semblance of Lucy's avatar's rigidity. As Lucy and Michael's friendship deepens, their real world problems cross into Eden, and they try to help one another showing that not all internet contact is full of predatory depravity (even though Eva wrongly assumes this is the case early in Act 2).

Madwin's Benny is clearly a conflicted character trying to make sense of the world he perceives. Madwin and Bertken play well together and believably portray brothers who clearly care about one another. The dynamic of Benny, the older brother, leaning on his younger, more capable brother Michael for help is touching.

Duarte's Eva is a force of nature, dominating her family, while simultaneously dwelling in her own pit of despair as she desperately clings to Lucy for validation of her own self worth. Duarte captures Eva's mercurial mood swings well in her interactions with Raghavan.

Evans' Lilian is a more sympathetic character, but not until later in the play when we see her despair over Benny's illness. She's at first dictatorial, but we later come to understand why when she says "You don't know what it's like. To watch your brilliant little boy disappear right in front of your eyes ... and you can't stop it and you can't stop thinking it's all your fault."

In both families, the fathers seem almost to be afterthoughts, with both Mauro's Neil

and Havlan's Manny taking the back seat to their wives' directions.

The final cast member is Katie Zeisl playing an assortment of bit parts, though her role as Jenny Tepperman provides a pivotal focus for sorting out Benny's problems.

In her program notes, Smith states that the cast "prepared this play for you in 18 rehearsals" which is impressive, though there are still a few rough edges to the production. The actors could have used just a bit more rehearsal time to smooth out some of their line delivery and scene change choreography.

The other problem stems from the writing with scenes that are extremely short, so the execution is very choppy with some loss of story continuity during the set movements. The structure would better fit a film presentation where quick cuts could be used, but on stage, since costume changes accompany many of the scene changes, time lags are inevitable.

The set, designed by Ron Gasparinetti and Jason Arias, features two large, marbled, roughly L-shaped set pieces that double as beds, benches, walls, and dividers as they are turned in different directions for each of the many locations. Carson Duper's lighting design includes changes used to distinguish between Eden and the real world, Eden having an eerie glow to it along with some lovely scenic backdrops projected on an up-stage drape. Mauro also served as sound designer, and the set changes are covered by electronic music which helps set the mood, though in one scene, the volume seems slightly out of control. Erin Haney's costumes also help distinguish the real world from Eden with neon piping literally lighting up the virtual world.

The resolution is unsettling. While both families have major upheavals that they have to address, the Meltzers follow a believable solution path. On the other hand, the Perez family leaves the audience hanging with what feels like a very transient patch to their situation.

In spite of a few flaws, *March* is an interesting and socially relevant production that invites discussion. It might even change one's view of the value of internet friendships and is definitely worth a look.

What: Sharyn Rothstein's *March*

Where: Dragon Productions Theatre located at: 535 Alma Street, Palo Alto, CA94301.

When: Thursdays – Sundays through 2 December 2012

See <http://www.dragonproductions.net> or call 650-493-2006 for more information.

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