

Laughs, tears triumph in 'Marvin's Room'

Dragon Theatre in Palo Alto has succeeded at one of the most difficult premises to convey successfully in theater: "dramedy," the juxtaposition of drama with humor. "Marvin's Room," now at Dragon, through Feb. 12, starts off with a major obstacle to overcome, and does.

Most people don't feel comfortable laughing while people around them are dying. But gay activist Scott McPherson's dramedy surfaced at the height of the deadly AIDS epidemic when, as McPherson himself wrote, "my lover has AIDS. Our friends have AIDS. And we all take care of each other, the less sick caring for the more sick."

If you think this is an unusual prologue for a comedy, you're not alone. Yet there are many laughs in McPherson's script, nudged and coaxed out by director Laura Jane Bailey as well as some of the cast members who recognize and walk that delicate line between comedy and tragedy.

As Hank, the bad boy older brother who set the family house on fire and is in a mental institution/loony bin/nut house, Ronald Feichtmeir is nothing short of riveting. He is spooky good, gawky and full of physical ticks.

With her large, expressive eyes, pale skin and slight frame, Mary Lou Torre is physically perfect to play Bessie, the sister who is forlorn, good-hearted and always willing to take care of others. But Torre's interpretation seems one dimensional, so it's difficult to relate to her. She should be different at the end when she's dying of leukemia than

at the start of the play, when she thinks she only has a vitamin deficiency. And her poorly fitted wig is not her friend. It frequently covers those sad-looking eyes so the audience is even less likely to see her pain.

The storyline is episodic and complex, and the frequent scene changes make it more difficult to pay attention to what's going on. It's also never explained satisfactorily why the two sisters have been estranged



for 18 years. What is known is that when the leukemia-stricken Bessie calls her sister, Lee (a convincing Meredith Hagedorn as the selfish, cigarette-smoking mother from hell) packs up her two sons and heads to Florida to reunite with her ailing sibling, their bedridden father and sickly aunt.

The play itself is at times harshly compelling, at times awkward and in need of better segues between scenes. But several other actors help keep the action moving (and the laughs coming). Jeff Swan as Dr. Wally is eerily witty as the absent-minded doctor you'd never want to have, and Lynda Marcum has some comical moments as the soap opera-loving Aunt Ruth whose brain has been implanted with an electronic device that frequently opens the garage door.

Credit Neal Ormond for a set design and construction that somewhat resembles a row of dominos on wheels and attached to each other. How the stage crew was able to make so many set changes so quickly is a tribute to their nimbleness and ingenuity. Sound designer Jeffrey Lo came up with a surprising panoply of songs that keep the audience's attention during those scene changes.

The fact that playwright McPherson passed away of AIDS in 1992, just two years after "Marvin's Room" premiered in Chicago (and the same year it won two prestigious awards for its off-Broadway run in New York), makes its theme both poignant and personal.

Some people will likely be concerned about the combination of comedy and drama in his play. But McPherson understood that "that's the way life is." As he watched other HIV-positive friends die, he recognized that what's most important is "a simple act of love, by caring for another."

Still, his Bessie is fairly annoying and hard to take. Can anyone really be that saintly?

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Theater review

What: "Marvin's Room"

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

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Through: Feb. 12

Tickets: \$16 - \$25; 650-493-2006 or www.dragonproductions.net

