

Palo Alto Online Palo Alto Weekly: Putting the fun in dysfunction (January 27, 2012)

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Putting the fun in dysfunction

Dragon finds the charm and humor in an odd comedy

by Kevin Kirby

Scott McPherson's play "Marvin's Room," which opened last weekend at Dragon Productions, is a difficult work to describe. The show is a comedy about Mortality with a capital M; nearly half the characters are either terminally or chronically ill. The laughs, though, come not from the sort of gallows humor one might expect, but rather from a sitcom-y blend of over-the-top nuttiness and all-too-real family dysfunction.

In most cases, "difficult to describe" also means "difficult to perform," and that's certainly true of McPherson's play. The artists must arrive at a coherent production style that helps the audience navigate this off-kilter world — letting us know that it's OK to laugh at the absurd moments amid all the tragedy. Director Laura Jane Bailey can be proud that Dragon's production is a success, with the script's obtuse charms well displayed.

The story focuses on Bessie, a woman who has devoted her life to caring for her bedridden father, Marvin — victim of a stroke and, subsequently, cancer — and her Aunt Ruth, who seems unable to handle routine tasks even though a brain implant has alleviated her chronic pain. (In one of the show's typical gags, Ruth's implant squawks violently and, we're told, opens and closes the garage door.)

Given the family's medical history, it's hardly surprising when Bessie is diagnosed with leukemia. This probable death sentence is delivered by Dr. Wally, a man so bumbling and distracted as to make one wonder how he ever earned an M.D. Jeff Swan, who plays Dr. Wally, lays it on particularly thick in the first scene. This may be a deliberate choice, designed to signal the audience that nothing in this show is to be taken *too* seriously.

Bessie is played by Mary Lou Torre, a familiar face at Dragon. Over the years, she has appeared in many shows, generally as an earnest best friend or a befuddled neighbor, and has helped out behind the scenes for many more. Now she's front and center. In

many ways, Torre is an ideal Bessie: She may miss a few of the character's darker notes, but she captures Bessie's optimism, her devotion to family and her unassuming manner.

An example: Late in the play, speaking to her sister Lee, Bessie expresses her gratitude for having had so much love in her life. Lee assumes that she's referring to the love she's received, but Bessie explains that it is the love she has *given* that is important. "I am so lucky to have been able to love so much," she says. In the wrong hands, that line could come off as maudlin, but for Torre, it's simply a statement of fact.

Much of the play's humor — and the majority of its "realest" moments — comes from the relationship between "good sister" Bessie and abrasive "bad sister" Lee. The two have been estranged for so long that Lee's teenage boys, Hank and Charlie, have never met their Aunt Bessie. But the leukemia diagnosis changes all that, as Lee and her sons fly to Florida to be tested as potential bone-marrow donors.

Dragon founder Meredith Hagedorn is Lee, and she seems to enjoy this opportunity to play against type as the short-tempered, none-too-bright single mother. Her gradual warming to Bessie is wholly believable, as the sisters struggle to reclaim a family bond that has suffered from years of bitterness and neglect. And Hagedorn's look of gleeful shock is priceless when straight-arrow Bessie reveals that the one great love of her young life was a carny.

But perhaps the most touching relationship in McPherson's script is the one that develops between Bessie and her nephew Hank, played by Ronald Feichtmeir. To make this trip, Hank has been temporarily released from the mental institution where he has lived ever since burning down the family's house. Lee is at her wits' end dealing with the boy, but Bessie seems to find a way inside his defenses. Torre's scenes with Feichtmeir are the production's best, possessing a clarity that the rest of the show never achieves. (Outside of these scenes, Feichtmeir is good but not exceptional. His Hank is quiet, aloof, possibly "slow." This is fine as far as it goes, but misses the underlying current of anger that would make his relationship with Lee understandable.)

Remaining cast members are Lynda Marcum as Aunt Ruth, Clifford M. Samoranos as young Charlie, Janine Evans in dual roles as a psychiatrist and a retirement home director, and Jim Johnson as Dr. Wally's dim-witted assistant. Johnson also plays a costumed "gopher man" who comes to Bessie's aid at Disney World, and he provides the offstage vocalizations for Marvin. (Neither Marvin nor his room ever appears on stage.) All four seem comfortable in their roles and contribute some nice comic bits.

The show is well paced at just over two hours. This is crucial, as it keeps us from getting bogged down in the characters' tragedy.

The cast also assists with the numerous set changes. The script calls for eight locations, most seen only once. Scenic designer Neal Ormond has built three rolling wall panels hinged together in series. In the well-choreographed and blessedly quiet scene changes (one of which got a smattering of applause on opening night), this tripartite wall is whipped into a L-, S-, and C-shaped formations indicating different locales. While the resulting visual variety is limited — one side of the bendy wall, painted green, represents Bessie's home, while the other side, yellow, must serve as backdrop for all other locations — clarity is provided by furniture, wall hangings and signs.

The show's designers also deserve bonus points: lighting designer Steve Shumway for the subtle palm tree gobo projected on the walls of Bessie's house; Ormond (with possible assist from Shumway) for providing a refrigerator, mounted to the wall of Bessie's "kitchen," that glows with an interior light when the door is opened; and costumer Kathleen O'Brien for Ruth's squeaky slippers that — rather than being annoying — are a quirky reminder of the character's infirmity.

"Marvin's Room" is not a show that will appeal to everyone. But Dragon's production is a strong one, and it will likely become funnier, more affecting and more polished as the run continues.

What: "Marvin's Room," a play presented by Dragon Productions

Where: Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St, Palo Alto

When: Thu.-Sat. at 8 p.m., Sun. at 2 p.m., through Feb. 12

Cost: \$25 general admission, with discounts for students and seniors

Info: Go to dragonproductions.net or call 800-838-3006.