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**Stinger**

**Dragon Productions sees sweet danger in 'As Bees in Honey Drown'**

By Marianne Messina

DOUGLAS CARTER BEANE'S play *As Bees in Honey Drown*, now presented by Dragon Productions, should be offered in workshops for recovering aspiring artists. Fittingly, Diahanna Davidson, former frontwoman for an original rock band, plays the protagonist of this cautionary tale. Sophisticated grifter Alexa Vere de Vere (Davidson) lures up-and-coming novelist Evan Wyler (Cole Smith) into her jet-setting net with the honey of endless namedropping, art-referencing and witty eloquence: "Have some *petit déjeuner*, though be warned, the déjeuner here is very petite." She asks him to write a screenplay of her life—"this mouthwatering movie idea I have up my Gucci sleeve. David Bowie, no less, wants to play my father."

De Vere (a root of truth in her name) is a dazzler as Davidson mixes up an intoxicating brew—urbane yet girlish, charismatic yet ruthless. And her grandiose language is infectious: "a Guernica of a tie"; "I crave to see you in this suit." It's no wonder that even the gay Wyler falls for Alexa in every way, for Alexa inspires references to drag-queen icons like Sally Bowles (*Cabaret*) and Holly Golightly/Audrey Hepburn (*Breakfast at Tiffany's*). (Beane is responsible for getting Wesley Snipes, Patrick Swayze and John Leguizamo into drag with the 1995 film based on his play *To Wong Foo ...*).

The first act bedazzles like a flim-flammer with a series of quick-paced transactions (both verbal and financial) between Alexa and Evan. The quick repartee is often specious and occasionally so numbing that the ambience overpowers the words. At the disco, for example, girls dance on boxes, lights flash, music pumps out a heartbeat and Alexa's glittery babble just adds to the trance. This production, directed by Dale Albright, makes sure that, like Evan, we're seduced not by substance but by "the buzz, the hype, the flash, the fame without achievement." At one point, as jilted artists pace and chatter about success, a buzzing sound comes up through the din of their fame-dropping voices (Andrew Custer sound design).

By blurring the line between acting and acting someone who's acting, Davidson keeps us pretty sure there's a con going on, but never quite sure what it is. And Smith's Evan is self-possessed enough to add a pang of familiarity to his downfall. Albright went with a nifty box production to keep set changes swift. The only blemish on the black-box arrangement was making Davidson (and Cole for that matter) carry set boxes after a moment of tense drama—actually, melodrama. Theater logistics aside, you just can't have your grand lady schlepping set pieces. Other than that, the eight boxes make a creative but convincing concession window, recording mogul's desk and airplane compartment. A geometric bit of art painted on the floor (Ron Gasparinetti, set design), later became a painting—same title as the play—by Alexa's ex-lover, Mike (Kevin Capps). The painting's title was as unlike its substance as everything else in this play.

As Alexa lobs Faustian questions at the characters (and the audience), her opportunistic



**Diva:** Diahanna Davidson charms everyone in 'As Bees in Honey Drown.'



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moral compass points out where each of them lands on the continuum. On one end, the painter Mike has managed to stay out of the proverbial honey, and Copps' Mike appears contented and unexcitable. As the record mogul, Michael Sally creates a warm-hearted slimeball quite willing to find himself "barely keeping afloat in the sticky sweet success, like bees in honey drown." Of course, bees only drown in honey when humans are stealing it. "She stole my arrogance," says ex-lover Mike. Amid suggestions that de Vere gives as much as she takes, the play leaves it up to the audience to sort out the jokes from the judgments.

**As Bees in Honey Drown**, presented by Dragon Productions, plays Thursday–Saturday at 8pm and Sunday at 2pm through June 24 at Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St., Palo Alto. Tickets are \$13–\$20. (650.493.2006)

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