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Balancing Acts

Friends and family engage in liquefied combat in 'A Delicate Balance' at Dragon Theatre

By Marianne Messina

HAILING FROM the mild-mannered end of playwright Edward Albee's spectrum, *A Delicate Balance* features an emasculated man (would it be Albee without one?) who doesn't hack anything with a carving knife. Instead, Tobias (Dan Roach) attains manliness when forced by his strong wife, Agnes (Mary Horne, cunningly dressed in mannish house coat at one point in this Dragon Productions presentation), to blurt out his true feelings, however incoherent, and start calling the shots. Beginning the play with the kind of well-ordered life Albee finds too comfortable to be true, Agnes and Tobias have taken in Agnes' alcoholic sister, Claire (Monica Cappuccini). Soon the revolving door will also usher in their daughter, Julia (a petulant Rachel Joseph), on the way to her fourth divorce. Funny, but sardonic, Claire sums it up: "Claire couldn't find a man if she tried, and here comes Julia back from the wars ... four Purple Hearts."



Photograph by J. Kaysan

BLOODLESS REVOLUTION: Mary Horne (left) and Monica Cappuccini hoist more than a few in Dragon's take on Albee's 'A Delicate Balance.'

Claire's mordent editorializing—she wishes Agnes dead on several occasions—starts to stress the couple's well-weathered relationship. And when 40-year friends Harry (Bill C. Jones) and Edna (Shareen Merriam) decide to invite themselves to Agnes and Tobias' house for an extended visit, the household gets down to claws, fangs and pack war. With a bar on one side, a couch on the other and mixed drinks everywhere between, Dragon Productions director Arden Thomas and set designer Ron Gasparinetti visually spell out Albee's *in vino veritas* formula: to remove mask, use plenty of lubrication.

Flanked not by a wall but by two tiers of curtains, this set doesn't overwhelm you with housy trappings: a rug, a coffee table, enough to suggest complacent Middle America, but with a sort of lost land behind it where Julia goes "hysterical"—guests have night terrors and couples fumble in the dark. Despite lots of language, there is never a dull moment, thanks to very crisp acting in the roles of the two formidable women. Cappuccini's wealth of inflection and superb phrasing keep the caustic Claire appealing while eviscerating—the character you love to dread. Meanwhile, Horne's Agnes is inscrutably firm; her deliberate, enunciated speeches walk a fine line between haughtiness and control. "I keep things in shape," Agnes explains about the role of people like herself, "whether we are proud of that shape or not. We keep; we hold." Horne makes it easy to both comprehend and disapprove of the verbal savagery directed at Agnes by Claire and Julia.

Merriam also shines in her role as Edna. At first pathetic, apparently constrained by civility, Edna proves to be sharp and uncharitable underneath, and Merriam doles out both modes evenly. Roach takes the dull "cipher" as Julia calls her father to a place that evokes great sympathy as Tobias wrestles with the question of who should stay and who should go.

Applying the greatest balance to Albee's words, Dragon Productions creates the kind of show that causes different people to root for different characters, given the same

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evidence. Already strewn with the psychological offal of low blows, Albee's humor is best served not with passion but with bloodlessness. And Dragon gets it. Except for affable, puddin'-livered Tobias, these characters are duly bloodless.

A DELICATE BALANCE, a Dragon Productions presentation, plays Thursday-Saturday at 8pm and Sunday at 2pm through March 9 at Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St., Palo Alto. Tickets are \$15-\$20. (800.838.3006)

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