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Simon Says

Neil Simon's 'The Gingerbread Lady' takes the measure of a woman beyond the verge

By Marianne Messina

ONCE YOU pay your bill and check out, they don't care if you get knocked up by a dwarf." That's crude-mouthed, retired singer Evy Meara (Diane Tasca), the title character of Neil Simon's *The Gingerbread Lady* from Dragon Productions Theatre Company. Just getting warmed up after a stint in rehab, Evy hurls out cynical barbs indiscriminately, and they often land on her two longtime friends Jimmy Perry (Martin Gagen) and Toby Landau (Carolyn Power). During one of their heart-to-hearts, Evy tells Toby, "Don't pout, you'll crack your makeup and start an avalanche on your face." For Toby, glued to her compact mirror as she perpetually powders her nose, "it's your feminine obligation" to be beautiful for a man.



Photograph by James Kaysan

Maternal Instincts: Evy (Diane Tasca, right) confronts her daughter, Polly (Vivian Cook), in 'The Gingerbread Lady.'

Rather than being insulted, Toby and Jimmy settle in more comfortably the more Evy hits her pre-rehab stride, and both Power and Gagen give us complex, likable characters that predate the pop wisdom of language like "enablers." Playing the former recording artist and stage performer, Tasca projects the voice of someone who is always partly onstage. Thanks to an easy rapport between the three actors in this neurotic triumvirate, Tasca's self-deprecating sarcasm and gleefully blunt insults fall out so offhandedly you could miss them.

Set designer Cy Eaton's overstuffed living room—a piano, a couch, two tables with lamps, a Victrola style phonograph and stacks of vinyl; dark-walled and far from posh—makes this "gingerbread house" feel perfectly gloomy when Evy gets drunk, turns the lights out and sits in semidarkness. In a clever stroke, Eaton has placed Evy's front door at the foot of the theater house stairs, so as actors close the door behind them and turn to leave (through the audience), we can see the exasperation on their faces.

Neil Simon has kept the characters' ages ever in focus, winding up to a failed party meant to celebrate Toby's 40th birthday. Also 40, Jimmy the out-of-work actor (with Gagen's charming English accent) is "still waiting to be discovered." It could be the standard "growing up is a bitch" play, except for the sense that Neil Simon is really on the side of "get over your Peter Pan self and grow old gracefully." When Evy's daughter, Polly (Vivian Cook), moves in, Polly catalyzes the evolutionary leap, as suggested by an inebriated Evy: "I'm 43 years old and I'm trying to be a grown-up lady." Polly's lines are as smart-ass as her mother's, and yet Cook gives the daughter a quiet sobriety. Polly seems to have traded her mother's outward theatricality for inner resilience.

Having rewritten the play several times, Simon apparently took a lot of flak for Evy's language ("I look out and see little boys, fags, hippies, but no men") and for trying to mix the tragedy of Evy's self-destructive habits with the humor of her big, stage-grown personality. After being punched out by ex-boyfriend Lou Tanner (James Allen Brewer), Evy assures her daughter, "I had medical attention—a dog licked me while I was down." Thirty years after Simon wrote the initial version of the play, a responsive, enthusiastic audience at the Palo Alto theater suggests we're over the need for discretion or at least for one-dimensional comedy. The edgy humor works precisely because it distracts, probably in the same way Evy's insulting humor distracts her friends from situations they find unacceptable. Evy directs probably her most nurturing line to Toby—"You're a great broad, Toby"—in a scene with long speeches and crying that Power handles deftly. Gagen's Jimmy can quip and roll with the best of Evy's lines. Only the smoothest, natural timing could pull off this balancing act between brutality and hilarity without pushing the laughs or tripping over the mixed messages, but director Dave Sikula brought this seasoned cast right to it.

The Gingerbread Lady, a Dragon Productions presentation, plays Thursday-Saturday at 8pm and Sunday at 2pm through May 13 at the Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St., Palo Alto. Tickets are \$13-\$25. (800.838.3006)

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