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 Letters & Opinion
 Society
 Sports - Local
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Friday Apr 27

Comedic tragedy of alcoholism runs thin

By John Angell Grant / Theater Reviewer

Yes, Virginia, there are rowdy women who drink, swear and fornicate. That seems to be the statement playwright Neil Simon wanted to make in his oddly incomplete 1970 play "The Gingerbread Lady," currently running in downtown Palo Alto at Dragon Theatre.

In "Gingerbread Lady," a 43-year-old nightclub singer on the skids, just back from 10 weeks in rehab, tries to turn over a new leaf and make a go of her collapsing New York life. Soon she is drunk again and resuming her downward slide.

"Gingerbread Lady" documents the landscape of one person's alcoholic relapse. Both wisecracking and grim, it manages some of dramatist Anton Chekhov's middle ground between comedy and tragedy.

In nightclub singer Evy and her actor gal pal Toby, playwright Simon has created two female characters with graphic sexual appetites, who are frank about their sexual behaviors. "Gingerbread Lady" feels like it may have been Simon's spin on emerging 1960s feminism.

Simon has trouble, however, developing and resolving meaningful story lines around these behaviors, and presents the women as victims or burnouts. That absence of a meaningful story line seems to be a touch of misogyny.

When Evy arrives home from rehab, her nervous friends receive her and wish her well. A neglected 17-year-old daughter (Vivian Cook) returns. A philandering former boyfriend (James Allen Brewer) reappears. One bill collector (Alex Fiore) starts knocking at the door.

Evy's hovering friends police her life and try to keep her from drinking again. But Evy (Diane Tasca) has come out of rehab without an acceptance of herself, and for that reason, it seems likely that she will drink again.

All this takes place on designer Cy Eaton's appropriately cramped, claustrophobic, flea-market dressed Manhattan apartment set. Carolyn Power offers the evening's best performance as gal pal Toby, in a scene addressing her own marriage meltdown.

The show's major drawback is that Simon plays for the 1970s shock value of sexually open women, but then doesn't know where to go with it.

In the play's alcoholism segment, there is little genuine understanding of the disease and no awareness of the solution. As a result, the story feels like a celebration of blind co-dependence. It doesn't seem to occur to anyone to go to an A.A. meeting.

Once the predictable drinking starts up anew, it's all over, except for the crying, wailing and gnashing of teeth. A daughter arguing with a drunken mother has limited story mileage.

Director Dave Sikula's fidgety staging has trouble finding its emotional center. As singer Evy, Diane Tasca doesn't sell her relationships with others. Ironically, the staging seems reluctant to address its own sexual impulses head-on.

Part of the problem is the casting. Forty-three year-old nightclub singer Evy, and her musician ex-boyfriend who is ten years her junior, are played by actors considerably older than their respective characters.

Further, inexplicably Evy's gay friend Jimmy, a struggling actor, is played earnestly by an Englishman (Martin Gagen) with a full-blown British accent, even though the character is referred to as an American actor, with a large family from Patterson, N.J., and a long history of regional theater performances in smaller towns around the United States.

There is only so much ground you can go over meaningfully, if you're trying to explain why an alcoholic drinks. In the end, alcoholism is a disease, and you either have it or you don't.

A story that spends its time speculating on the disease's characteristics gets trapped in a narrow framework without any real sense of a solution. The documentation of those behaviors then becomes merely part of the environmental map of denial so characteristic of the epidemic of alcoholism.

Rating: Two stars



James Kasyan / Dragon productions

Diane Tasca (left) and Vivian Cook play mother and daughter in the Dragon Productions presentation of Neil Simon's "The Gingerbread Lady."

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