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Friday Jun 15

## 'Bees in Honey' deserves buzz

Solid performances in entertaining downtown production

By John Angell Grant / Entertainment Writer

Being successful as an artist is all about knowing how to play the media hype game. That's one message in Douglas Carter Beane's 1997 hit off-Broadway play "As Bees in Honey Drown," running in downtown Palo Alto as an entertaining Dragon Theatre production.

In "Bees" a young novelist publishes his first book to critical acclaim, but little early money. Soon a mysterious, vampish Auntie Mame-type woman approaches him and offers the young artist \$1,000 a week to write a screenplay about her life.

In the Dragon Theatre production, charismatic Diahann Davidson is very effective as fast-talking, trash-talking Alexa Vere de Vere, the Auntie Mame redux. For impoverished first-time novelist Evan Wyler (Cole Smith), Alexa's offer of a grand a week is a pipe dream come true.

Scenic artist Ron Gasparinetti's black box, bare-stage set with a few modular cubes accommodates a variety of set changes, from an apartment and hotel room, to a men's clothing shop, a limousine, restaurant, nightclub, office and a Staten Island Ferry boat.

Be careful what you wish for, the play cautions, because you might get it. And it turns out that vampy Alexa is addicted to life in the New York fast lane.

The worldly woman and her young protege sprint through the cocaine-tinged world of 1990s New York party life. Alexa introduces the wide-eyed boy to witty repartee and a world of instant narcissism.

This is a culture in which people live as though their lives are screenplays in development. For Alexa, the denizens of this world are not the people they were born to be, but the people they have dreamed of being.

Suddenly, the champagne goes flat. Much of the story turns out to be an elaborate confidence game. (Shades of David Mamet.)

The play's second half morphs into a more serious deconstruction of the frothy, trivial issues of the play's first half. What, our young novelist wonders, are the motives that drive people into this glamorous but empty art world life?

"As Bees in Honey Drown" turns out, surprisingly, to be a Pygmalion story. Here actor Kevin Copps steps forward in a moving performance as surprise character Mike, the key to all this mystery.

Ten years after its hit New York production, "As Bees in Honey Drown" feels a bit dated, the way a New York Post gossip column from ten years ago would feel dated, with its casual references to the Pet Shop Boys, car phones and fax machines.

Nonetheless, "Bees" still carries a punch in its deconstruction of the desperate need for artistic success that this class of Manhattan denizens lives for. We learn that careers are made and lost by the fluke of effective or ineffective public relations.

This kind of life is not about merit. It's all a function of knowing how to play the game.

Card shark and famed investor Warren Buffett is credited with saying about a table full of poker players, "If you're in the game for 30 minutes and you don't know who the sucker is, then you're the sucker."

The young novelist in this play, seeking life in the fast lane, learns that lesson the hard way.

"As Bees in Honey Drown" makes for an entertaining evening. Live theater is back in downtown Palo Alto. Following Dragon's matinee performance this Sunday, there will be an audience talk back with the cast.

Rating: Three and one half stars

AT A GLANCE: "As Bees in Honey Drown," Through July 1, Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St., Palo Alto, \$13-\$20

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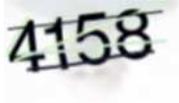
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