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- Palo Alto Weekly
- Arts & Entertainment
- March 9, 2007
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- Pizzazz Coupons
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Arts & Entertainment - Friday, March 9, 2007

### An actors' showcase

*'Maybe Baby' at the Dragon offers fun and games for the lovelorn*

by Jeanie Forte

If you've ever been in love or ever searched for it, you can relate.

Dragon Productions continues its second season in its Palo Alto theater with "Maybe Baby, It's You," by Charlie Shanian and Shari Simpson. The 90-minute show offers a light-hearted look at love through 11 vignettes.

Men and women of all types and all ages are represented as they search for that elusive carrot, true love. Two performers, Dragon Artistic Director Meredith Hagedorn and Noel Wood, play all the roles, which is the best part of the show -- we get to see both of these superb actors change like chameleons to meet the demands of each scene.

Hagedorn is sheer delight as a nervous date, or not-so-blushing bride, or a feisty pre-teen; and she totally rocks as the blind date from Hell, er, Greece. In one of the funniest vignettes, an eager young man discovers that his blind date is, in fact, Medea, who is not happy about the turn of events in her life. Hagedorn's spot-on characterization and comic timing make it work with hilarious effect.

Not to disregard Wood -- he has to match Hagedorn in energy and excellence, and he does. In one of the earliest scenes, his Best Man character breaks out into frenzied dancing -- and what a dance. Wood offers a terrific display of abandonment, and in a tux, no less.

He also makes a fine senior citizen in one of the more tender scenes, as two elderly divorced mates joust for rapprochement. His four teenage boy characters are a hoot, recognizable and comical.

It is because of these two great talents that the show works at all. It's a relatively lightweight piece, with predictability and too much banality regarding the complex subject of love relationships. As each scene unfolds, one hopes for more surprise or originality, and sometimes gets it, but not often enough. Even the appealing scene with Medea resolves into an all-too-ordinary ending.

Occasionally a scene starts with promise but flounders and goes nowhere, as with the scene "Dream Lovers," where two characters search for their ideal loves. The idea is intriguing, but doesn't play out in a way that reveals new insights into our delusions.

This seems to be a persistent flaw in the script, although sometimes it might be that the over-the-top, broadly played comedy runs roughshod over any potentially sensitive moments buried in the text.

Still, I enjoyed watching Wood and Hagedorn inhabit these wacky characters, and the rare thoughtful moment gives them a chance to demonstrate their more serious acting skills as well. Clearly they're having fun in this romp through love, which invites the audience to enjoy it with them.

The set by Ron Gasparinetti provides a colorful, simple backdrop to the action, although I found the upstage moving panels a bit mystifying -- I wasn't sure why they needed to be moved for every single scene. Scene changes were long, owing to moving set pieces and actors' costume transformations. Fewer of each might have facilitated a more flowing action.

To cover for the scene changes, director Bill Starr opted for voice-over narrations of love poetry, but these were read with such flat emotion that they didn't match the play's action. I wondered whether I was supposed to hear them with irony, or as straightforward odes to love. At times they were simply hard to hear and understand, which was a problem with the final vignette.

But the production values and imperfect script are secondary to the pleasure of seeing talented local actors show off their stuff -- Wood and Hagedorn alone are worth the price of admission.

**What:** "Maybe Baby, It's You," a show of 11 vignettes about love, by Charlie Shanian and Shari Simpson, presented by Dragon Productions Theatre Company

**Where:** Dragon Theatre at 535 Alma St. in Palo Alto

**When:** Through Mar. 25th, with 8 p.m. shows Thursday through Saturday and 2 p.m. matinees on Sundays

**Cost:** Tickets are \$13-\$20.

**Info:** Call (800) 838-3006 or go to [www.dragonproductions.net](http://www.dragonproductions.net).

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