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Arts & Entertainment - Friday, April 27, 2007

A powerful change of pace

Neil Simon departs from comedy in intense 'Gingerbread Lady,' presented by Dragon Productions

by Kevin Kirby

As the cast and crew mingled with the appreciative opening-night audience following last Friday's performance of "The Gingerbread Lady" at Dragon Theatre in Palo Alto, virtually every cast member could be heard voicing the same sentiment in the same slightly stunned tone. "I didn't think we'd get so many laughs."

They shouldn't be so surprised. After all, the author of "The Gingerbread Lady" is none other than Neil Simon, one of Broadway's most prolific and successful comedy writers.

Granted, "The Gingerbread Lady" is not his usual fare. A portrait of an alcoholic singer who has just returned from rehab and whose chances of staying on the wagon are decidedly slim, it's a far cry from the Felix-vs.-Oscar zaniness of "The Odd Couple." Nonetheless, Simon is a craftsman; even when his subject matter is grim, no one else can construct a domino chain of successive set-ups and punch lines like he can.

Now put Simon's script in the hands of a director and six actors with, collectively, an impressive array of theatrical credentials, and it's no wonder Friday night's audience received the play so enthusiastically.

Director Dave Sikula has done a nice job with the piece. The show is well paced, and Sikula's staging keeps things visually interesting, even in the very small space that is the Dragon stage.

Designers Cy Eaton and Kelly Ground also make important contributions: Eaton's set and Ground's costumes do a lovely job of fixing the story firmly in the early 1970s. (The Op-art-inspired wallpaper that graces the set should come with a warning: "May cause unwanted fashion flashbacks in viewers over 40.")

But the obvious linchpin in this production is actress Diane Tasca, who gives an accomplished, gutsy performance as Evy Meara, the washed-up singer for whom the term "recovering alcoholic" is a bit too optimistic.

Tasca starts out slow. She underplays her first scene — Evy's return home after 10 weeks in rehab — missing some opportunities to reveal the depths of fear and neediness that lie beneath her subdued facade. Her sexual come-ons to her gay friend Jimmy (Martin Gagen) and to the delivery boy, Manuel (Alex Fiore), are unconvincing, and the reflexive verbal barbs with which she greets her well-wishers are lacking in sting. On the other hand, one can hardly blame Tasca or Sikula for wanting to soft-pedal the darker aspects of Evy's character in the early scenes.

When the liquor bottles come out in the second act — when a birthday party for Evy's friend Toby (Carolyn Power) turns into a midlife party for all involved and Evy turns to alcohol to numb the pain — Tasca really lets loose. As the new, sober Evy crumbles and the vulgar, drunken, out-of-control Evy reemerges, Tasca runs the gamut: rationalizing, cajoling, mocking, blaming, badgering, cursing, pleading and ultimately alienating every person in the room.

Gagen and Power turn in polished performances as Evy's friends Jimmy and Toby. Each of them arrives at the birthday party with a tale of woe, and their back-to-back rants are the comic high point of the show.

But Tasca is best when she's pushed, when Evy's pretense of control is threatened, and the hallmark of her friends is their reluctance to push her out of her comfort zone. The real threats to Evy's emotional equilibrium come from two other characters.

The first is her ex-lover, Lou Tanner (James Allen Brewer), a struggling songwriter who has decided he wants Evy back — preferably the old Evy. "You think you're cured?" he says of her time in rehab. "You've still got a whole life to get through."

If Lou is the devil on her shoulder, pouring poison in her ear, the angel on Evy's other shoulder is her 16-year-old daughter, Polly (Vivian Cook). After years of infrequent, non-custodial visits, Polly wants to reestablish a relationship with her mother. On the day Evy returns home from rehab, Polly arrives with a suitcase and announces that she's moving in.

Cook, who can't be older than 16 herself, does some nice work, especially when the script gives her a strong emotion to play. We root for Evy's sobriety because we're rooting for Polly: for her hope and her innocence. In the aftermath of Evy's Act II binge, as Polly is drawn into the caretaker role that so often falls to children of alcoholics, it is a morally complex moment. Polly certainly doesn't need this sort of responsibility, but her presence may be the only motivator that will allow her mother to hold her life together.

"The Gingerbread Lady" was Neil Simon's first foray into heavy dramatic territory, and, structurally, it is not an entirely successful experiment. He doesn't really allow Evy to struggle with her addiction — one minute she's on the wagon and the next, oops!, she's fallen off — and the pop-psych self-analysis in Evy and Toby's "morning after" scene is facile and heavy-handed. But as Dragon's brave production makes clear, this little-known play is a perfectly viable dramatic work from one of America's great comic playwrights, with more than enough laughs to make the darkness bearable.

What: "The Gingerbread Lady," a Neil Simon play presented by Dragon Productions Theatre Company

Where: Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St., Palo Alto

When: Thursday-Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m., through May 13

Cost: Tickets are \$20 Friday and Saturday, \$18 Thursday and Sunday (\$5 discount for students and seniors).

Info: Call 650-493-2006 or go to www.dragonproductions.net.

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