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## As time goes by

'Six Years' captures social, emotional history

by Kevin Kirby

The conceit behind Sharr White's play, "Six Years" — currently enjoying its West Coast premiere care of Dragon Productions — is that each scene takes place six years after the preceding scene. Set primarily in and around St. Louis, Mo., the story begins in 1949, then hops to 1955, 1961, 1967 and finally 1973.

The central characters in this timeline of post-war Middle America are Phil and Meredith Granger, played by Steve Voldseth and Meredith Hagedorn (Dragon's artistic director). As their lives unfold through the 1950s, '60s and into the '70s, White uses their circumstances to provide a recap of the social history of the U.S. during the Cold War: the rise of hegemonic suburbia, women's inroads into the business world, the invention of fast food.

Thankfully, "Six Years" is more than just a backhanded history lesson. White has another, more dramatically compelling story to tell, and, for the most part, he keeps the obvious cultural exposition to a minimum.

When we meet the Grangers in 1949, Phil has just returned home from World War II... four years late. Hospitalized after the war with "exhaustion," he has not communicated with his wife since 1944, and she has drawn countless horrible conclusions from his silence and his prolonged absence. Phil is apparently suffering from what would be diagnosed today as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and much of the play's subsequent conflict revolves around his failure to meld seamlessly back into the fabric of American life.

Voldseth and Hagedorn both give solid performances, depicting the Grangers' attempts to reconnect, raise a child and find their place in a rapidly changing America. Voldseth, however, faces a particular challenge inherent in the script: In portraying a man from a characteristically stoic generation whose wartime trauma leaves him emotionally isolated, Voldseth's performance at times seems merely blank, and the audience — much like Meredith — can only guess at what might lie beneath the surface.

Hagedorn does quite a good job playing against Voldseth's flat affect, allowing his silences to propel her character's insecurities. However, she risks losing the audience's sympathy when, near the end of Act I, she discusses her marital infidelity with hardly a hint of remorse.

Other cast members include Gary Gerber as Meredith's brother, Katherine Heaney as his wife (and, more memorably, as a floozy with whom Phil shares a drink in a Chicago lounge), Rich Miller as one of Phil's business associates, and Kevin Hull as the Granger's 18-year-old son. They're a talented group, though their stage time is limited by the structure of the play. (This is especially true of Hull, who appears onstage for perhaps 60 seconds and speaks only a single word before shipping off to Viet Nam.)

It is worth noting how Dragon's production of "Six Years" deals with the perils common to plays of this type, i.e., plays that follow a small number of characters through a wide sweep of history by checking in at punctuated intervals. Shows with this structure frequently suffer from dreadfully long scene changes, as stage hands shift the set from one locale/era to the next and actors dash to their dressing rooms to draw more lines on their faces and add more grey to their hair.

"Six Years" avoids these pitfalls, but not without certain trade-offs. There is no attempt made to change the actors' apparent ages with makeup; we are simply asked to understand that they're six years older each time we see them. This is probably a wise move, though it does create a bit of cognitive dissonance in the first scene, as neither Voldseth nor Hagedorn looks to be in their early 20s. In lieu of age makeup, the actors could have done more to delineate their characters' ages through their physicality. Unfortunately, their movements, mannerisms and speech patterns are basically unchanged from 1949 to 1973, adding to the sense that they're not really aging at all.

Costumer Magenta Brooks captures the changing fashions of the period admirably, but this, ironically, exacerbates the problem. With the shift to brighter colors and shorter skirts in the 1960s, Hagedorn's costumes actually make her look younger in the second act than in the first.

The set changes are handled reasonably well, particularly in light of the cramped quarters and non-existent wing space at the Dragon Theatre. The action alternates between two motels, two suburban living rooms, a bedroom and a cocktail lounge: six locations for only five scenes. Ron Gasparanetti's set design — in combination with some well-choreographed furniture moving — allows these changes to take place as quickly as the actors can change clothes. There is no way to overstate the importance of this achievement to the pace of the show. The only downside is that the furniture and floor plans are essentially identical from one room to another, from one era to the next.

"Six Years" is a bold undertaking for Dragon, and they have delivered an entirely passable result. While the show did not seem to have fully "gelled" on opening night, there is every reason to believe that it will improve with each performance.

The opening-night audience (which seemed to skew toward an older demographic than most of Dragon's opening-night crowds) was very appreciative, giving the cast a standing ovation at curtain call. While many of the issues are indisputably relevant today — the veterans' issues, certainly, but also Phil's sense of awe at the social possibilities signaled by JFK's inauguration — this show's greatest appeal may be for patrons with first-hand memories of the territory it covers.

**What:** "Six Years," a play presented by Dragon Productions

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

**When:** Thursdays-Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m., through Nov. 30 (no Thanksgiving performance)

**Cost:** Tickets are \$20 for Fri. & Sat., \$18 for Thu. & Sun., with a \$5 discount for students and seniors.

**Info:** For more information, or for ticketing online, go to www.dragonproductions.net. For 24/7 box-office help, call 800-838-3006.

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