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Arts & Entertainment - Friday, June 15, 2007

## High time in the high life

*Dragon's 'Bees' is a delicious, fast-paced comedy*

by Kevin Kirby

There were a handful of empty seats at the opening-night performance of Douglas Carter Beane's "As Bees in Honey Drown" at Dragon Productions last Friday, an unusual occurrence for a Dragon opening. It's a shame. Beane's play, under the direction of Dale Albright, is fast-paced, funny, and quite astute -- a delicious and surprisingly thought-provoking comedy that deserves full houses.

It's the story of Evan Wyler, one of the newly nearly famous, a nouveau Someone. Wyler's first novel has just been published to critical acclaim, and he is all too eager to reap the rewards, to exchange the ascetic life of the starving writer for the hedonistic, fast-paced lifestyle of the glitterati.

When he is approached by Alexa Vere de Vere, a music producer who wants Wyler to write a screenplay based on her life story, he jumps at the chance.

Alexa is larger than life: a hard-living, big-spending, self-appointed, one-woman welcoming committee for Those Who Have Arrived. She loves nothing more than taking talented newcomers like Wyler under her wing, introducing them to rock stars and very good tailors, helping them to reinvent themselves in her world. In no time at all, Wyler is her newest satellite, following her, goggle-eyed, through a world of limousines, exclusive clubs, and posh hotels.

He soon learns, of course, that the party doesn't last forever and that the morning after can be painful.

Diahanna Davidson as Alexa and Cole Smith as Wyler both give exceptional performances, capturing the rush of possibility that fame and money bring, as well as their characters' desperate desires to leave their "ordinary" selves behind. One of the play's funniest sequences comes in the second act when Wyler's research into Alexa's past gives way to an extended flashback: We literally see her "cramming" for her new persona with videotapes of "Cabaret," "Auntie Mame," and "Breakfast at Tiffany's."

It seems wholly appropriate that Beane employs a number of cinematic devices in constructing his story. Flashbacks, rapid-fire voice-overs, inter-cut scenes, and montages all add to the sense of heady disorientation. Director Albright has done a very good job managing these moments, ensuring that the juxtaposed fragments add up to a dizzying yet comprehensible whole. Albright and his cast have clearly made an effort -- one that is all too rare in community theater -- to understand and work *with* the playwright's rhythms.

The rest of the cast consists of four actors -- Michael Sally, Kevin Copps, Cristy Lollis, and Anne Ho -- each of whom plays multiple roles. Sally is particularly funny as a jaded music industry exec who relishes the task of knocking Wyler down to size. Lollis and Ho also exhibit good comic skills in their various roles.

The supporting cast member who is most successful at delineating his multiple characters, though, is Copps. He plays a gay haberdasher, a violent British rocker named Skunk, and (in the show's most sympathetic performance) a painter who finally shows Wyler a different definition of success. Each is a distinct and fully realized character.

From a technical perspective, Dragon's low-budget production is adequate but not stunning. The rapidly shifting locations -- limo, newsstand, hotel lobby -- are created by the rearrangement of eight or 10 cubes, their different faces decorated to suggest different locales. The cast carries out these shifts efficiently enough, but the resulting settings are sparse, with nothing on stage to suggest the seductive opulence of Alexa's world.

The lighting design does little to enhance the show's visual impact. No doubt there are limitations inherent in Dragon's small lighting arsenal, but it seems that more could have been done with color and isolated pools of illumination. Furthermore, the stage is lit unevenly, a fact that becomes apparent while Wyler is trying on his Really Good Suit: The lights aimed at his legs and torso as he examines himself in the mirror create the impression that his pants do not match his suit coat.

In contrast, the production makes exceptionally good use of music. Attention has clearly been given to the choice of songs for pre-show and intermission, as well as the music used under a handful of scenes. In addition to creating atmosphere, the songs actually support the show's plot and themes.

"As Bees in Honey Drown" is typical of Dragon's best work: an engaging, well-directed, well-acted production of a challenging contemporary play. With plenty of laughs, a few surprises, and enough substance to spur a lively debate about fame and fortune on the ride home, it's an evening of entertainment well worth the price of admission.

**What:** "As Bees in Honey Drown," a play presented by Dragon Productions Theatre Company.

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

**When:** Thu.-Sat. at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m., through July 1.

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

**Info:** Call the box office at 650-493-2006. For more information, or for ticketing online, go to [www.dragonproductions.net](http://www.dragonproductions.net).

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