

- Home
- News
- Palo Alto Weekly
- Weekly
- BEACH ABSTRACT
- April 25, 2008
- The Almanac
- Mountain View Voice
- Fogster Classifieds
- Town Square Forums
- Sports
- Shopping
- Pizzazz Coupons
- Best Of Results
- Community Calendar
- Movies
- Restaurants
- Things to Do
- Real Estate **NEW!**
- MultiMedia
- Photos
- Community Resources
- Visitor Info
- Lodging
- Seniors
- Teens & Kids
- Other Helpful Sites
- Class Guide
- Local History
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Arts & Entertainment - Friday, April 25, 2008

Witty and wistful

Dragon delivers comic drama for our times

by Jeanie Forte

Douglas Carter Beane landed on the map of American playwriting with "As Bees In Honey Drown" in 1997. "The Country Club" came a few years later, and is more blatantly autobiographical, being set in Beane's hometown of Wyomissing, Pennsylvania, bastion of upper-class yuppieness. As one character says, it boasts the kind of home where "Martha Stewart could forget she was Polish."

The plot centers on six close-knit friends who grew up together and are now somewhat lost in their mid-20s, wondering where they should go with their lives. Soos (Katie Anderson) has returned home after her failed marriage, and is initially full of contempt and sarcasm about her friends' stagnated lives — could they really all be just the same as they were when she left?

We meet Pooker (Sarah Cook), wry and cynical but utterly embedded in the country-club lifestyle; party-planner Froggy (Mary Lou Torre) who now wants to go by her real name, Louise, and fully step into the upper-class conservative life she has inherited and married; Brian (Daniel Martin), her superior but hen-pecked husband; Zip (Jack Starr), the perennial boy-man with whom Soos had a long-term relationship in high school; and Hutch (Michael Champlin), Zip's best buddy, an alcoholic destined to be a good old boy. They're all intelligent, educated, and well-heeled. But Beane sees the artifice and emptiness behind it — intelligence or position doesn't guarantee happiness.

As Zip and Soos inevitably reconnect, an outsider arrives: Hutch's fiancée, Chloe (El Beh), dark and exotic and distinctly different. Their relationship is disdained as trashy and cheap, although it sounds like a lot more fun than the marriage we hear Froggy and Bri had. The union is also clouded by the affair that Chloe and Zip fall into, even before the vows.

Soos says she's leaving, but can't; Zip and Chloe try to break it off, but can't; the endless drinking and partying mark a year of inertia, as well as the casual destruction of dreams. Whether Beane's play ends tragically or hopefully is up to the viewer to decide; either way, it's an equivocal end, with no clear victory or accomplishment.

Beane's signature wit keeps the play buoyant and lively, as the characters' self-deprecation is expressed in sarcastic bon mots. It's hard to dislike characters who are having such fun, even while we recognize their shortcomings. As Pooker says at one point: "Everyone has their little stories, and no one talks about them. That's what's called community spirit."

There are a few lines that locate the play in 1999, pre-Twin Towers and pre-Iraq, but other than that, too little has changed in the last decade, or for that matter, in the last several decades — empty lives and shallow minds are not specific to any one age. Beane's particular take on them is, however, relevant to our time, and all too familiar. Some of what they say and do may hit a little close to home while you're laughing out loud.

Anderson as Soos is terrific: nuanced, subtle and complex. She's matched by strong performances from Cook, the ever-dry, wise-cracking Pooker; and Starr as a loveable and naughty Peter Pan archetype. Champlin brings some nice colors to the bland role of Hutch, and Martin is suitably starchy as the prig you love to hate.

Torre does a good job with Froggy, although I would have liked a little more duality to show us her former wildness contrasted with her apparently newfound respectability. Beh seems at sea with Chloe, not quite finding the right balance for her character, although giving a serviceable performance. It's also a bit disconcerting to hear her referred to so often as Italian, when the actress is decidedly Asian.

Ron Gasparinetti's set captures the "cub room" nicely, albeit somewhat on the pedantic side. Neil Satterlund's lighting design capably changes season and time, with some lovely moonlight trysting. Costumes, by Melinda McDermott, overall give us character and '90s fashion; I missed the famous male nude scene, but that can be forgiven in a 40-seat house.

Dragon Productions has put together a show worth the time and effort, featuring some excellent performances, definitely delivering laughter as well as food for thought.

What: "Country Club," by Douglas Carter Beane, presented by Dragon Productions

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

When: Through May 11, with 8 p.m. shows Thursday through Saturday and 2 p.m. matinees on Sundays

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

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

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