



World Leader in Printer Cartridge Refilling

Located Between: Whole Foods & Peet's Coffee.

161 Homer Avenue, Palo Alto • 650.838.9455



Arts & Entertainment - Friday, February 22, 2008

Lives in the balance

Dragon production explores the meaning of friendship, fueled by Albee's dark humor

by Kevin Kirby

Imagine this: a quiet Friday evening at home after a routinely dysfunctional family dinner. You're having a drink with your spouse, exchanging banter worthy of a Pulitzer-Prize-winning playwright, when your closest friends in the world arrive at your door, announcing that they intend to move in with you because — for reasons they do not attempt to explain — they are suddenly terrified in their own home.

Now answer this question: Do you let them stay?

This is the question facing Agnes and Tobias in Edward Albee's 1966 play "A Delicate Balance," which opens Dragon Productions' 2008 season. "A Delicate Balance" won Albee the first of his three Pulitzers, and it is replete with all the hallmarks of the playwright's most famous work: the dry, dark humor; the slightly absurd situation played out with life-or-death seriousness; the pent-up angst that eventually breaks forth with savage force, shattering the placid veneer of everyday American life.

Dragon's production hits most of these notes solidly. Under the direction of Arden Thomas, the cast succeeds in bringing home the central questions of Albee's play: What does friendship mean? On what is it truly based? How far do our obligations to friends and family extend? And what of our obligations to ourselves? Albee's premise is direct enough, and the cast's performances sufficiently honest, that audience members are likely to ask these questions of themselves during the play, as well as after.

Mary Horne and Dan Roach play Agnes and Tobias, respectively. Much of the play's weight rests on their shoulders. Both are competent performers, and both seem to relish immersing themselves in Albee's icy dialogue. Nonetheless, it is not clear that the two of them would be able to carry this work alone.

Agnes, in particular, comes off as a bit *too* icy. As if falling into a trap that Albee has set for her, Horne finds the character's negative traits easily enough — her uncharitableness, her martyrdom, her inflexible need for order — but at the risk of alienating the audience. Agnes' moments of affection, humor, contentment seem merely self-satisfied, and we never have much reason to care for her.

Tobias, on the other hand, is so ineffectual, so indecisive, so determinedly innocuous, that Roach seems to have difficulty bringing him fully to life. It is only in the final scene, when Tobias — caught among friends, family and his own untested sense of duty — comes unhinged in a nearly incoherent tumble of conflicting emotions, that Roach truly commands our attention.

Adding some life to an otherwise bleak domestic chemistry is Agnes' wisecracking, alcoholic, live-in sister, Claire, played with panache by Monica Cappuccini. Cappuccini's first appearance on stage energizes what has been a rather mannered opening scene, as Claire manipulates Toby and baits Agnes, apparently for her own amusement.

The first scene culminates with the arrival of Harry and Edna, longtime family friends who have been driven from their own home by a baseless panic and now seek shelter with Agnes and Toby. Bill C. Jones, as Harry, is a good match for Roach's Tobias: another innocuous middle-aged man unsure about the boundaries of a friendship that may be based on little more than prolonged acquaintance. Jones plays Harry's awkwardness and embarrassment well, though he has an unfortunate tendency to mug — his facial expressions sometimes stealing focus from the events he is reacting to.

Shareen Merriam gives a more nuanced performance as Harry's wife, Edna. As Harry tries to explain the reason for their visit, Merriam sits stiffly on the couch, clutching her purse, until finally she blurts out, "We were frightened!" with such vulnerability that their old friends have no choice but to offer them a room for the night.

Things become more complicated the next day, when Harry and Edna announce (with no further explanation offered) that they intend to take up residence permanently. Meanwhile, Agnes' and Toby's daughter, Julia, has returned home, claiming sanctuary as she flees her fourth marriage, only to find her room occupied by her godparents. Rachel Joseph, as Julia, delivers a nice mix of petulance and incredulity, and the force of her indignation seems to sharpen Horne and Roach in the scenes they share with her.

The resulting fireworks and revelations play out on the small but effective set designed by Ron Gasparinetti. Consisting of a love seat, chair, coffee table and a small bar, all backed by pleated ivory drapes, the set offers sufficient staging options to prevent the show from stagnating visually. (This is aided greatly by Cappuccini's penchant for perching on the coffee table and the back of the love seat.) Director Thomas' decision to confine all entrances and exits to the upstage-center gap in the draperies is a bit odd, but does not seem to create too many traffic problems or too much confusion regarding the layout of the house.

While it is a somewhat tamer play than Albee's more famous early works ("Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," for instance, or "Zoo Story"), "A Delicate Balance" is nonetheless vintage Albee, and the current production captures the spirit of the piece faithfully. For those who appreciate theater that sends them home with something to think about, this is a solid bet.

What: Edward Albee's "A Delicate Balance," 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 March 9

Cost: Tickets are \$18-\$20, with a \$5 discount for students and seniors.

Info: Go to www.dragonproductions.net or call 650-493-2006.

Comments

There are no comments yet for this story.
Be the first!

Add a Comment

Name:

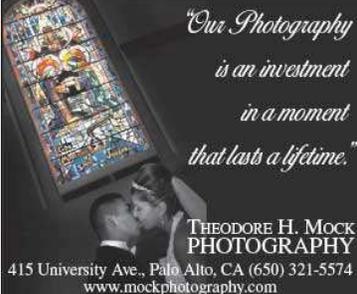
Share: 

ADVERTISEMENT

"Our Photography is an investment in a moment that lasts a lifetime."

THEODORE H. MOCK PHOTOGRAPHY

415 University Ave., Palo Alto, CA (650) 321-5574
www.mockphotography.com



ADVERTISEMENT

Featured Advertisers

Community Access Television
Serving the Midpeninsula
On the Internet and Cable Channels 26, 27, 28, 29 & 30

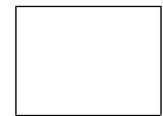
Select Windows

394 First Street, Los Altos • 650-941-0744
www.selectwindows.com

(650) 691-9863



Cheap Tires.
Buy the best tires at the lowest prices.



Top residential specialist
highest ethical standards

FREE seminar


Best Web Site First Place 2006

- 2006 Awards from the California Newspaper Publishers Association
- Palo Alto Weekly**
- First Place Photo Essay
 - Special Issue
 - Best Website
- Freedom of Information
Environmental/ Agricultural Reporting
- Second Place**
Sports Coverage
Sports Story
- Mountain View Voice**
- First Place Columns
- The Almanac**
- First Place General Excellence
 - Public Service Feature Story
- Second Place**
Freedom of Information



DOWNTOWN LOCATION
VALET PARKING
DOG WALKING

\$8M+ more SAN FRANCISCO

NewInSF.com
Ads by Gooooooolle

Select your Neighborhood or School Community: [Not sure?](#)

Neighborhoods

Choose a category:

Since this is the first comment on this story a new topic will also be started in Town Square!
Please choose a category below that best describes this story.

Categories

Comment:

26 page views



© 2008 Palo Alto Online
All rights reserved.