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Quick-change comedy

Actors in Dragon's hilarious 'Greater Tuna' transform themselves into a host of roles

by Rebecca Wallace

When Tom Gough says, "I'm the only high-C soprano in the First Baptist choir," you believe him.

Gough has the character of Bertha Bumiller down. He struts around in a bubble-gum-pink outfit, offering up hash browns and making a call on a rotary phone, one hip bump for every dialed digit. He reprimands imaginary dogs so vividly that you can hear the whines, and turns soft and sad to bemoan a wayward husband. He's so good you forget he's a male actor playing a woman.

This type of total immersion is what's needed for the down-home play "Greater Tuna," and the current production at Palo Alto's Dragon Theatre has it in spades.

Both Gough and Daniel Mitchell, the other half of the two-man cast, transform themselves 10 times over to play the residents of the tiny town of Tuna, Texas. After starting off as OKKK radio deejays, they branch out to demonstrate an impressive range of voices, tics, mannerisms and movements in characters male, female and canine.

Mitchell, for instance, plays all three Bumiller kids: dog-crazed Little Jody, swaggering Stanley, and cheerleader wannabe Charlene. Other characters include Sheriff Givens (Gough), who scratches his privates with his pistol; double-fisted smoker Didi Snavely (Mitchell), who sells used weapons; and creepy Klansman Elmer Watkins (Gough).

Written by Jaston Williams, Joe Sears and Ed Howard, "Greater Tuna" started out as a party skit. It evolved into a play that both affectionately joshed rural Texans and skewered them. By 1985, the play was hotter in American theaters than a Laredo parking lot. Two spin-offs followed.

"Greater Tuna" is an odd choice for Dragon Productions, which prides itself on presenting quirky little plays that rarely get staged. But "Tuna" and Dragon's intimate 42-seat house prove to be an excellent match.

As usual, scenic designer Ron Gasparinetti makes deft use of the space, with a Lone Star flag backdrop and a hanging "ON THE AIR" sign. A wooden table gets flipped around easily by the actors for seamless scene changes. In one especially nice moment, a large radio rotates to become a velvet-curtained podium for The Reverend Spikes (Gough) to preach behind.

The small theater also gives the audience a close look at every character metamorphosis the actors go through. Kudos to the backstage dressers, Beth Boulay and Brittany Pirucki, who are undoubtedly running around like chickens with their heads cut off.

Director Meredith Hagedorn keeps the pace zippy, although some of the script is a bit long-winded. The theater can also get uncomfortably warm when there's a full house, which can cause the laughs to flag. Wear layers.

But overall, this production makes for an entertaining evening and a chance to watch two talented actors not only strutting their stuff but also seemingly having a blast together.

The younger Mitchell and the more seasoned Gough have an amicable big brother-little brother dynamic that works well. In fact, Mitchell is a student of Gough's at Foothill College, where Gough chairs the theater arts department.

Mitchell has a flair for voices, creating characters full of audible nuances. If he sometimes mugs overly, it can be chalked up to youthful exuberance. He also gets to show some acting chops in his strongest character, Stanley Bumiller, who acts like a criminal but may not have the heart of one.

Gough is simply a joy to watch as he bounds from role to role. He's also a founding member of the improv group ComedySportz-San Jose, which means he's practiced in making character quick-changes, and it shows.

What: "Greater Tuna," a play by Jaston Williams, Joe Sears and Ed Howard, presented by Dragon Productions

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

When: Through March 1, Thursday through Sunday at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2.

Cost: Tickets are \$20 general and \$16 for students and seniors.

Info: Go to www.dragonproductions.net or call 650-493-2006. For tickets, call 800-838-3006.

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