

Palo Alto Online Palo Alto Weekly: 'Private Eyes' and truth and lies (January 28, 2011)

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'Private Eyes' and truth and lies

The audience has to figure out the action in Dragon's fast-paced, twist-and-turn production

by **Jeanie K. Smith**

You may not know that Steven Dietz is one of the most produced playwrights in the U.S., only slightly behind Shakespeare and Tennessee Williams. That might be a good enough reason to go see the current Dragon Theatre production of his play "Private Eyes" — to see what all the fuss is about.

But an even better reason is the quality of Dragon's production. It's an excellent evening's entertainment, sure to generate laughter and post-show discussion.

The play begins with Lisa (Kelly Rinehart) auditioning for a role in a play for a director named Matthew (Fred Pitts). It's a bit of meta-theater that's delicious satire, poking fun at directorial pomposity and the hapless actor at his mercy. But suddenly another director named Adrian (Martin Gagen) appears, and everything you just saw is thrown into question.

In order not to write a review full of spoilers, I can say no more, except that we meet two more players in this complex plot: Frank (Vic Prosak), a therapist and more; and Corey (Sara Luna), a waitress and more. Who is related to whom and how is something you'll have to figure out for yourself, along with the rest of the action.

Once the first plot twist happens, we realize that we can't trust our perception of what we're watching, as reality ground zero — what's real and what's imagined and what's lied about — is continually shifting. Just when you think you have it all figured out, you're in for another surprise revelation. Equally in doubt is truth. Who's telling it? Who isn't? Who's lying to whom? Again, you're on your own here.

Along the way there are some fabulously funny scenes, and Dietz's witty dialogue. The characters bravely schlep through the comic twists, themselves somewhat hapless at the author's pen. There are a few serious moments that perhaps give a clue as to

Dietz's intended message, but nothing too heavy-handed or obvious.

The play does tend to sag somewhat in the middle of each act, a little bloated with its own plot twists, but it's a minor quibble in an otherwise fast-paced show. Director Lennon Smith has done a good job of staging to maximize the comedy and clarify the complex plot.

Rinehart and Pitts are spot-on in their respective roles, marvelous at the quick changes required of their characters. They have an ease with each other that works well. Gagen is equally at home in his various incarnations: classic directorial stereotype, pathetic wannabe, miserable husband. These three actors carry the bulk of the action, and it's dizzying to watch them but enjoyable to see how they manage the complexity.

Emily Hagen's costumes add nicely to the characters, and Henry Sellenthin's set manages several totally different locales with minimal changes. Jeffrey Lo's music choices mostly capture the mood, although there's a critical moment when less might have been more.

Kudos to the Dragon for kicking off its new season with a terrific show. Be sure to plan for some fun discussion after the show, preferably over a glass of Merlot. (OK, that's all the spoiler you're getting.)

What: "Private Eyes," by Steven Dietz, presented by Dragon Productions Theatre Company

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

When: Through Feb. 13, with 8 p.m. shows Thursday through Saturday and 2 p.m. matinees on Sundays

Cost: Tickets range from \$15 to \$30.

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