

Big Pharma and romance can make for a complicated combination



By Ande Jacobson

Big Pharma has what many would say is a well-deserved reputation as being an industry solely focused on its profit margin. This theme is explored as Dragon Theatre Company opens its 2014, nine show season with *Rx* by Kate Fodor. Fodor's script is a quirky satirical romance that also indicts Big Pharma. The plot follows one company's pursuit of chemical solutions to non-problems as it convinces patients they are sick and that a pill can solve everything. Along the way, an unassuming researcher gets a bit too close to his study subject, and the resulting romance threatens both of their livelihoods.

Dr. Phil Gray (Keith C. Marshall) is a Schmidt Pharma researcher studying the new wonder drug SP-925 (pronounced "nine-to-five") to fight a condition termed "workplace depression". SP-925 is a happy pill that Schmidt Pharma hopes will help millions of workers learn to love their jobs as long as they take this expensive new medication. During the initial interview, potential study candidate Meena Pierotti (Janine Evans) tells Phil that she goes to the Bon-Ton Department Store twice a day to cry just so she won't be seen doing so at the office. Meena is a managing editor at *American Cattle &*

Swine Magazine and evidently has a lot to cry about.

One day, while crying in her usual place in the old ladies' underwear section at the Bon-Ton amidst the "great big white ones that look like sails," Meena meets Frances (Sandy Pardini Cashmark), and they strike an unlikely friendship.

Over time, Meena cries less as she "feels like any second she might start feeling better." Through the study, Phil and Meena grow closer catalyzed by some unlikely subjects.

Meena's boss, Simon (Brian Flegel), starts out all business and is a bit dismayed at Meena's unexpected mood shifts. Once Meena is in the study, her mood improves, and she and Simon plan to write a major exposé on abuses in factory farming. Their working relationship also improves dramatically for a time.

Phil's boss Allison (Meredith Hagedorn) needs no mood enhancers; she loves her job. When Phil asks Allison what she likes about it, she tells him that she likes "all the little triumphs...the problem solved, the budget trimmed, the enemy conquered." Allison later brings in ad man Richard (Evan Michael Schumacher) to pitch the perfect jingle for SP-925 which Richard suggests they rename Thriveon.

Director Jeanie Smith makes some excellent staging choices. The script has 24 scenes, some of which are very short. Smith worked with set designer Christopher Decker to give the production a smooth presentation with a minimum of interruption during the scene changes. The Dragon stage hasn't any fly capability, and *Rx* requires several locations including Meena's office, a conference room, an exam room, Phil's bedroom, the old ladies' underwear section at the Bon-Ton, and a hospital room.

Although not entirely apparent, all of those locations are present on the stage throughout the production within four distinct regions where quick lighting changes, designed by Jeff Swan, help to focus audience attention. Smith chose not to use a turntable platform as that would take too long to transform. Instead, there are three major set pieces, one of which transforms into three distinct locations center stage.

There is also a screen upstage center to afford the actors a hidden quick change space. Evans in particular must perform quick changes each time she leaves the stage. A very nice touch is the presentation of a large caduceus on the floor downstage center.

Smith also makes nice use of Lance Huntley's sound design. There is a bit of popular music covering only the longest of the scene changes, but most are executed in silence. Another nice touch includes various computer sounds as appropriate during the presentations.

Hagedorn is perfect as Allison. She relishes the part taking her over the top. Her character is aggressive, authoritative, and a bit loopy. Her Allison has her vulnerabilities, but they aren't all that obvious.

Marshall maintains a gentle air playing the nerdy researcher well, although at times he plays Phil a bit too bumbling and tongue tied. Still, his romantic entanglement is believable and quaint. He and Evans have a nice rapport, and their characters mesh. Marshall subtly changes a few lines in the script that read as intentional, for example substituting "Candy Crush" for "Tetris" making the reference more current in one monologue.

Evans is a pro. She is meek as Meena, capturing the distraught hopelessness of her character well. Her Meena gains a bit of courage to stand up for herself as time goes on, and in her romantic entanglements, she's the one in control. Evans brings out the best in each of her cast partners keeping the comedy at or near the surface. Her scenes with Flegel are strictly comedic, while she has some genuine tender moments with Marshall.

Evans' scenes with Cashmark are a bit more guarded. Frances appears as a minor plot device to emphasize some of the changes in Meena as she progresses through the study. Cashmark has the appropriate physicality for Frances, a feisty little woman who'd been widowed long ago and has come out on top despite various challenges. Her line delivery is a bit lacking though as she frequently stumbles. Some of her scenes drag a bit as a result.

Schumacher's contrast in his dual roles is well done with Richard evidently close to Schumacher's own age. Richard is ambitious, energetic, and expert at his craft. His secondary character as a fellow researcher is older and far wilder, and Schumacher is likeable and quite zany in that portrayal.

The script is written without an intermission, but Dragon has inserted one. Even so, the play runs just under two hours, and it is well worth the trip to Redwood City to see this production. In addition to being an entertaining romantic comedy lampooning Big Pharma, *Rx* has the added benefit of prompting audience members to appreciate their own circumstances and livelihoods as they might well shine by comparison.

What: *Rx* by Kate Fodor

Where: Dragon Theatre located at: 2120 Broadway Street, Redwood City, CA 94063.

When: Thursdays – Sundays through 9 February 2014

See <http://www.dragonproductions.net> or call 650-493-2006 for more information.

(Photo courtesy of James Kasyan)

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