

'Rx' for comedy at the Dragon Theatre

Two large letters ("S" and "P," which stand for Schmidt Pharma) superimposed on a gigantic caduceus symbol on the floor tip off theatergoers at Dragon Theatre's latest offering, "Rx," that what's coming up has something to do with medicine. As they'll soon learn, however, it doesn't have much to do with the medical profession as they know it -- or does it?

This intriguing, sometimes ferociously funny look at how Big Pharma develops new drugs by giving them to study subjects -- some of whom are on placebos and some on the experimental drug -- is a subject ripe for comical dissection, and playwright Kate Fodor (a 2013 Guggenheim fellow in playwriting) has tackled it enthusiastically.

First performed in 2012, "Rx" may just be on the cusp of its popularity (it recently opened in Los Angeles for a two-month run). Judging by the large opening night crowd in Redwood City Friday night, it's likely to enjoy a good run on the Peninsula as well.

That doesn't mean "Rx" isn't without a few glitches. For one, the opening scene is played way too fast, so the audience is left to guess what's going on. Opening-night jitters also made the two leads, a mesmerizing Janine Evans as perennially depressed Meena Pierotti, and a rather stoic Keith C. Marshall as the clinical researcher Dr. Phil Gray, speak in a clipped, artificial way. Fortunately, they settle into their roles as the play progresses, though Marshall would do well to alter his impassive expression now and then.

Then there's Dragon's artistic director Meredith Hagedorn as the hyper team leader, Allison Hardy. Hagedorn rattles off her lines at the speed of sound. That's in character for the manic personality she portrays, but it's a problem when the audience doesn't catch some of her words, especially when she's addressing the shareholder's meeting and reciting (in her own words) a lot of "corporate crap."

Fodor's story centers on the hapless Meena, who is so depressed in her job as managing

editor of the piggeries section of American Cattle and Swine Magazine that she has to dash off twice a day to cry her eyes out in the "old-ladies" underwear section of a nearby department store. Dr. Gray interviews the anxiety-laden Meena and accepts her into the clinical trial stage of Schmidt Parma's drug (code named SP-925) trial which targets workplace depression due to a drop in "norepinephrine levels."

Evans nails almost every nuance of her character with grace, not an easy feat considering the fact that she undergoes upwards of 25 costume changes and zips from her office to the department store to Dr. Gray's office to his bed in the twinkling of an eye.

The latter is where this play gets a little unhinged. The doc becomes almost fixated on Meena, even researching her poorly received book of prose poetry and becoming obsessed with (and photographing) feet. But at least Evans brings out the best in Marshal, who finally shows some believable compassion and concern.

As Meena's sexy editorial director Simon, a convincing Brian Flegel brings life and color to his too-few scenes. But Sandy Pardini Cashmark disappoints as Frances, the sweet LOL Meena befriends in the department store underwear scenes. At times Cashmark appears to forget what she is supposed to do and she also misses a few lines of dialogue (Evans kindly chimes in with the words to fill the void). Yet Cashmark also provides some of the play's most tender moments.

In this production, the versatile Evan Michael Schumacher wears two hats: He's seen briefly as marketing guru Richard, but it's when he returns as the cockeyed scientist Ed Morgan -- arguably wearing the worst wig in the world -- that he really cuts loose. Whether letting out a wisp of a giggle, childishly skipping around or offering Dr. Gray the wrong experimental pills, he's a complete delight. He also gets to deliver one of the best lines in the play: "If we knew what we were doing, (the pill) wouldn't be called SP-214 'research.'" Incredibly, the pill is intended to cure heartbreak. Evans also has some comic zingers, as when Flegel follows her into the department store lingerie department. "You're in my underwear," she screams.

Director Jeanie K. Smith knows how to whip her actors into an amusing frenzy. The frequent scene changes are actually a weakness of the play itself because it requires the audience to constantly shift focus.

But Smith and the actors, together with the set changers for Christopher Decker's adaptable set design, do their best to make it all hang together. Jeff Swan's lighting was spot on, as was Lance Huntley's sound. Credit costumer Sharon Peng for coming up with an outfit for Evans that can be whipped on and off in seconds.

Overall, this production is a worthy start for Dragon's 2014 season. It's quirky, topical and funny enough to keep readers interested even with a rather ordinary ending. Now if only that wonder drug Thriveon ("You can thrive from Nine to Five") really worked.

Performances continue Thursdays through Sundays through Feb. 9.

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Theater

What: "Rx"

Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Through: Feb. 9

Tickets: \$30; 650-493-2006 or

www.dragonproductions.net