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Arts & Entertainment - Friday, October 3, 2008

## A conversation piece

'Spinning' will make your head spin

by Jeanie Forte

Rebecca Gilman's second play, "Spinning Into Butter," has generated controversy in its wake, raising questions regarding latent racism, political correctness and the heady intellectual world of academia. The current showing at Dragon Productions in Palo Alto gives us an interesting if flawed outing of the play.

Actually, the play itself is flawed, both in concept and structure. The plot follows a kind of awakening of the main character, Dean Sarah Daniels (Karen-Meredith Wolf), as she navigates academia and confronts her own racism, which rears its head related to two incidents: the application of a minority student for a scholarship, and the hate crimes committed against one of the few black students in her ivy league Vermont college.

She has a colleague lover, Ross (Kevin Kirby, a Weekly theater reviewer), who sort of cheats and spouts liberal idealism at the same time. She is hounded by colleagues (Dean Strauss, played by Rich Dymmer) and administrators (Dean Kenney, played by Chris Macomber) who have their own agendas when the hate crimes surface.

Other characters include the minority student (Jesus Fuentes), an Abercrombie & Fitch-type white student (Anthony Agresti), and the security guard, Mr. Meyers (Lance Huntley), all of whom contrast with their academic surroundings in terms of class and sensibility.

As the plot develops, Sarah's life and career unravel in the mounting realizations of her latent racism and her inability to change her dark thoughts. It's clear that Gilman wants us to identify with Sarah and her confessions — we should be saying to ourselves that we, too, realize we have racism in our hearts, that we can't let go of our fears and prejudices in spite of our liberal sentiments.

However, we also learn that Sarah is the child of alcoholics, and that much of what she says reveals a kind of self-hatred that is typical of that curse. Her prejudice in that context is similar to homophobia and anti-Semitism that is born out of low self-esteem and insecurities. So instead of identifying and beating our own chests, we can distance ourselves because she is such a specifically damaged character.

The play needs structural work as well, moving from one very talky scene to the next — these are intellectual characters who love to talk and hear themselves theorize and analyze. The "action" of the plot happens mostly off-stage — we hear about it or deal with the aftermath — or in Sarah's troubled psyche. It feels long and unfocused and unsure of its own path.

Performances by the ensemble are fine — the actors seem suited to their characters, and are competent enough for the demands of the text. Wolf carries the play, appearing in every scene, having to show Sarah's unraveling. Mostly it's convincing, although there are childish fits and lapses into near-hysteria that seem out of place. Kirby dominates as Ross, which feels incorrect, given that the emotional arc of the play belongs to Sarah. He comes across strong and in charge, rather than peripheral and intellectually misguided. These seem like directorial choices that tend to muddy the already murky waters of the play's thought, rather than clarifying them.

However, even with flawed text and direction and meandering pace, the play still achieves its intention of creating a context for a discussion of racism in our time. It's hard to walk away from it without talking about the issues it raises, and examining the characters, their various viewpoints, and the ugly specter of prejudice in all its forms. To that extent, this production succeeds in bumping us out of our comfort zone, at least a little.

**What: "Spinning Into Butter," by Rebecca Gilman, presented by Dragon Productions**

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

**When: Through Oct. 19, with 8 p.m. shows Thursday through Saturday and 2 p.m. matinees on Sundays**

**Cost: Tickets range from \$13 to \$20.**

**Info: Go to [www.dragonproductions.net](http://www.dragonproductions.net) or call 650-493-2006.**

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