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Cast saves play from excessive dialogue

Keith Kreitman

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"Spinning Into Butter," which opened at the Dragon Productions Theatre Company in Palo Alto, is set in the present but is really so 1970s.

It puzzles me this play has been given so much recognition and many performances in the past few years. Where was the playwright when prejudice and intolerance were red hot issues 30 years ago, when people were first examining the extent of their own and coming to terms with them, either positively or negatively, in society, educational institutions and the workplace.

This playwright's dialogue is excellent but just too much of it. This could have been a better play if someone with a scissors had been called in to chop down the length of some of the speeches, slice out redundancies and pace the rise and fall of emotions.

And the relevance of a romantic subplot in a play dedicated to examining tolerance and intolerance in an academic setting, escapes me.

It reminds me of one famous movie producer giving productions the "seat of the pants" critiques. When the seat got too warm, the butt started wiggling and one kept looking at one's watch, it was "back to the cutting room."

In a way it is sad because the director Adena DeMonte put together an excellent cast that makes this production still worth seeing.

The burden of the plot rests upon Karen-Meredith Wolf and she is outstanding as Dean Sarah Daniels, a young, socially conscience and idealistic educator, who in those days had been burdened with what was called "liberal guilt" about the historic mistreatment of African-Americans.

And as other idealistic educators before her had observed working in schools with a predominately African-American student body, many of these were not only indifferent to profiting from academic achievement, but retained a loud rudeness. There may be many good sociological explanations for this behavior, but she, like many others before her, not only burned out, but also realized, she herself was becoming fearful and intolerant.

So she escaped to a more pristine environment, as she became a dean in a small liberal arts college in the mostly white state of Vermont. Yet, still weighing heavily upon her was guilt and her efforts to help two "minority" students backfired on her.

Sarah attempts to land a \$12,000 scholarship for Patrick Chibus (Jesus Fuentes), who resents being labeled a Puerto Rican in the application because he was born and raised in New York City. So, he prefers to be called a "Nuyorican." In the end Sarah only succeeds in alienating him

When an African-American student Simon Brick (not seen on the stage) begins to find "hate" activities against him, it becomes a crisis situation which most of the faculty wishes the handle "in house," even after Sarah had already reported the first incident to the police.

The efforts of these bumbling "old guard" faculty members, Dean Burton Strauss (the always impressive Richard Dymer) and Dean Catherine Kenney (Chris Macomber) to educate the student body by calling campus-wide

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meetings only offends many of the students with their condescending manners.

Another student, Greg Sullivan (Anthony Agresti) seeks Sarah's help in forming a student club to debate the issues among themselves, originally to help his own resume for application to law school but later because he develops a genuine desire to help resolve the issues.

Kevin Kirby is faculty member Ross Collins, Sarah's past lover, who becomes her sounding board as she thrashes about trying to resolve her own inner turmoil.

Lance Huntley does an excellent job as Sarah's best friend, the security officer Mr. Meyers, the warmest human in the place, who has had 20 years of observing the conduct of the clueless old guard faculty as they played out their ego-driven agendas.

As always, Ron Gasparinetti comes through with a most appropriate set, this time for Sarah's office, where all the action takes place.

The title "Spinning Into Butter" is explained in a most surprising ending.

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