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- Sports
- Opinion / Letters
- Business
- Arts / Entertainment
- Lifestyle
- Obituaries
- Calendar
- Special
- Submit Event
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- Classifieds
- DJ Designers
- Community Forum
- Archives
- Advertise With Us
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## A comedy of manners

By Keith Kreitman

Set in the year 1999, "The Country Club" is sort of a comedy of manners. I say sort of because you won't find much in the way of manners in it. There is a lot of clever, cutting, bitchy conversation, but not much manners.

One would wonder whether we need another A.R. Gurney to examine the manner, morals and culture of America's ethnic W.A.S.P. population and its social affectations. But, here it is again. The play could be subtitled: "Much Ado About Nothing."

With no children to clutter up their lives yet, it is about a group of late-20ish "adolescents" that gather for special events and 11 yearly holidays in the clubroom of a small suburban town's country club and the play covers almost one year.

This is their bomb shelter from the intrusive and corrosive effects of the rest of humanity, especially those of color and other religions. As in the good old school days, the boys run about naked on occasion in front of the giggling girls. Drunks are not only tolerated, but gathered warmly into their arms.

The conversations are routinely bitchy, social indiscretions are viewed blindly and never discussed among "polite" company. Beer drinking is more than a just a spectator sport, followed closely by the seduction of one's best friend's wife. Even their names are reflective of delayed maturity.

Douglas Carter Beane, from his own experiences in the same town as the story, Wyomissing, Penn., reminds us, growing up wealthy is hard to do. And he illustrates that with much thrashing about and suffering. All hardly a matter of consequences for those in the lower economic classes, of course, whose "troubles" are more in the nature of lack of money rather than what to do with the overabundance.

This is one of those plays that try a reviewer's soul, where one needs to recommend a production, not for the importance of the subject matter or the construction of the play, but for the actors and the production. Ron Gasparinetti comes up with another of his beautifully appropriate sets and Dragon Productions fills it with seven capable performers.

One deduces the main character to be "Soos" (Katie Anderson), who returns to the shelter from a broken California marriage and revives her yearning for her former "big man on the high school campus" boyfriend, "Zip" (Jack Star), whose still overactive adolescent glands yearn for Chloe (El Beh), wife of his best friend Hutch (Michael Champlin).

The way to join this circle is obviously to marry in and Chloe, from a local Italian family, makes it to the tune of "social climber" and a lot of contempt for her "common" Catholic clan.

The rational words from the playwright come through the lips of "Pooker" (Sarah Cook), still single, a keen observer of the native culture and, seemingly, the best adjusted of the lot.

The social manure stirrer is "Froggy" (Mary Lou Torre) who has lassoed a wimp of a husband "Bri" (Danny Martin), who doesn't get to say much, but when he does, reflects some common sense.

Should former U.S. President Jimmy Carter have met with leaders of Hamas?

- Yes, they are a legitimate political organization key to Middle East peace
- No, they sponsor terrorist activities

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Although I would question the relevance of some of its play selections, Dragon Productions has come up with some quality work in its few years on the small theater scene. And its castings have always been among the best on the Peninsula.

All of the performers here are first rate. Mary Lou Torre, especially, always puts in memorable performances. She is one of those rare ones who not only speaks her lines but also has the character bubble up from within her. With flashing eyes, she acts with her whole body.

Jack Starr, however, confuses me. There are some segments where I thought, "This guy is a really good actor," followed by "What the heck's this guy doing on the stage?" There are some spots where he shows true sensitivity and understanding for the nature of the role, but these pass very quickly. If this guy can become more consistent, he could become one of the most sought after leading men on the Peninsula.

The moral of the story, I gather, is it's hard to be affluent and with no real purpose in life. That's about the whole story.

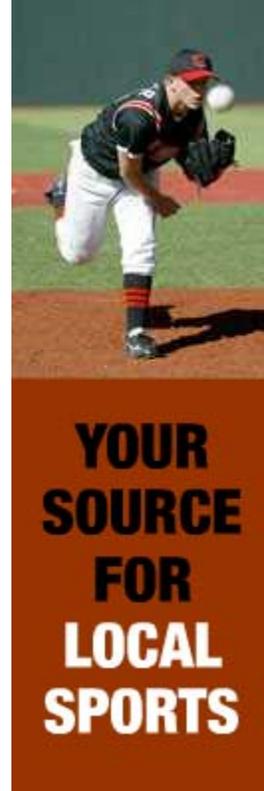
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