

Beyond the sea

Dragon's 'Seascape' looks at marriage and evolution with insight and humor

by Chad Jones

Slithering swiftly into the swirl of evolutionary debate, Edward Albee surmises that sea creatures are better at marriage than human beings.

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning 1974 play "Seascape," now at the Dragon Theatre in Palo Alto, Albee takes one of his favorite punching bags — the supposed bliss of matrimony — and dunks it into the dangerous riptide of absurdity. In the early '60s with his landmark "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" he pitted two warring, game-playing spouses against one another and let the fur fly in the presence of a younger, flabbergasted couple.

As Albee matured as a playwright, he became more artful in his evisceration of the connubial conundrum. By 1966, with "A Delicate Balance," he was turning marriage and relationships into something profound and absurd by rendering it with hints of monsters in suburban homes.

By the time he got to "Seascape" in the mid-70s, he was, as the play's title suggests, a skilled artist working his dramatic canvas in shades of reality, comedy and absurdity with aplomb.

It's hard to imagine another American playwright who could so successfully blend a straightforward discourse on spouses and mortality with an utterly daffy take on evolution represented by two highly intelligent sea lizards.

Try as you might, YouTube fails to provide video documentation of that key moment in the planetary history when sea creatures stepped onto dry land and began the relatively swift — and some might say downhill — evolution toward oil spills and Us Weekly.

Thankfully, in "Seascape," Albee imagines what that moment might have been like.

On a gorgeous sunny afternoon, an older couple savors the pleasures of what appears to be a Cape Cod-ish sort of beach (the dunes and pier of the set is rendered nicely by Gavin Takase-Sanchez, and the filtered sunlight and ocean waves are courtesy of Andrew Custer). Nancy (Patricia Tyler) is sketching the ocean, while her husband, Charlie (Bill C. Jones), relaxes and grumbles.

Nancy and Charlie are at a crossroads in their life together. After raising three children, they each view the remaining years in different ways. Nancy wants the golden years to be full of activity and meaning. "The only thing to do is to do something!" she urges, while Charlie is of the opinion that, "We've earned a little rest."

Charlie makes the mistake of reminding Nancy that she has "had" a good life, while Nancy charges that she is "having" a good life. Turns out that Charlie has wrestled with melancholia before, and in his youth, he was fond of what you might call "reverse evolution." He found great comfort in loading his pockets with stones and allowing himself to sink to the bottom of the sea for as long as he could stand it.

He wants to go backward, while Nancy gamely charges forward.

Their contentious impasse is broken by the appearance of another, younger couple, Leslie (Alex Hero) and Sarah (Jeannie Naughton). Their relationship appears to be quite healthy — going swimmingly, in fact. In large part, they don't think too much about marriage. They just live it.

It's not that they lack smarts. On the contrary, they're both bright, inquisitive and well spoken. And, as mentioned before, they're sea lizards who, for some inexplicable reason, felt compelled to break the watery bonds of their ocean home and cast their lot on dry land.

Welcome to evolution Edward Albee-style. It turns out that we humans, with our privileges, our educations, our "gracious" living, have an awful lot of time to think about what we want or what we don't want, what we have or don't have. Could that be devolution? Perhaps our over-thought, over-burdened lives have run their course, and now it's time for a newer, simpler species to come along and try it all again. And to think this was written before the advent of e-mail and smart phones.

Director Ana-Catrina Buchser takes a straight-ahead approach to this tricky material, and that's a smart choice. In Jones and Tyler, she has two comfortable, capable actors who are able to set a familiar tone: a husband and wife rummaging through well-worn arguments about who they are as individuals and as a couple.

Things get much more interesting with the arrival of Hero and Naughton, outfitted like Cirque du Soleil acrobats by designer Magenta Brooks. Their shiny lizard outfits, complete with tails, are topped by marvelously expressive metal gills along the sides of their heads.

The presence of the lizards could easily turn the play into a sketch, but the level of discourse is too high, and often too funny. Hero and Naughton could easily be ridiculous if they weren't so sincere and so wonderfully direct. Even their lizard mannerisms — twitchy bodies, flicking tongues — cease to be comedy as we come to accept the notion of talking lizards on a New England beach.

The creatures possess innocence limned with the common sense of the natural world. They know some impressive words but not too many of them. They also display striking chemistry with one another, which makes them even more believable as a fully invested married couple.

For two hours, Dragon's "Seascape" rolls merrily along, with Albee unspooling ideas and notions about the fate of humankind and the intricacies of married life. This is pleasurable theater that entertains and tickles the brain — but not so much you feel taxed.

There's fun and substance to be found as the real world collides with a fantastical biological experiment, all laboring to say something simple: Being married is rough, wonderful and, very occasionally, astonishing.

What: "Seascape" by Edward Albee, presented by Dragon Productions