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Arts & Entertainment - Friday, November 9, 2007

Killing with laughter

Murderous, yet implausible, comedy makes great theater

by Janet Silver Ghent

Three husbands are trapped in a state-of-the-art basement meat locker, along with deer and rabbit carcasses. Three suburban Chicago wives, stuck upstairs in the kitchen, are trapped in their marriages and ignore their husbands' frantic knocking.

Can these frosty marriages be thawed, or should the women view the crisis as an opportunity and make their escape? After all, it wouldn't be murder, or would it?

Improbable as it may seem, that's the theme of Michele Lowe's "The Smell of the Kill," a dark comedy of the absurd that opened last weekend at Palo Alto's Dragon Theatre, under the able direction of Ana-Catrina Buchser. The intimate venue serves as an ideal setting for exploring marriages-gone-bad through the kitchen-table talk of three women. The three have little in common, other than insufferable husbands who went to college together, forcing the couples to get together every month.

After dinner, the men hit golf balls in the living room while the women retreat for clean up, conversation and booze. But it's a forced retreat. The women don't especially like each other, which keeps this 80-minute play hopping, with episode upon episode of one-ups-woman-ship. It's not just talk. These lapsed feminists are not above engaging in some pretty hefty verbal sparring, not to mention catfights, losing their shirts in the process.

Picture a fusillade of golf balls bounding into the kitchen because the men, mercifully kept offstage, want their dessert right now. Tired of their abuse, Nicky (Dragon artistic director Meredith Hagedorn) piles the golf balls into a bowl and spritzes them with canned whipped cream. Later she delivers the most biting line she can think of to vulnerable Debra (Laura Jane Bailey), who dissolves in tears: "You made that soup from a can!" Then she rips Debra's red shantung blouse.

It's not all in good fun, but it's funny, and it's great theater -- particularly in the hands of three strong, well-matched actresses, each with a distinctive stage personality.

There's Nicky, the hostess, the only working mother of the three, and by far the most ornery. But she has good reason: Her husband, Jay, has been indicted for embezzling millions of dollars and she's about to lose her home. When the others ask her if she's seen the news, she opens a cabinet to reveal the newspaper clipping, pinned to the door with a chef's knife. And why are there two bullet holes in her otherwise pristine cabinets?

Describing her husband, she says, "When I met Jay, he was a vegetarian. He was a Democrat. He used to bake bread. ... I hate him." Now he hunts and hoards animal carcasses in the basement, and dinner was Bambi.

Nicky, who "can't find the key" to the meat locker, tries to convince the others to let freezing husbands chill. Debra, who is sweet, submissive and implausibly devoted to her husband, is not easily persuaded. When Marty booms, "Where are my cigars?" she apologizes for forgetting to bring them. Her husband has even forced her to send their only son away to military academy. The others know Marty is a womanizer and that Debra is in deep denial. Can a Phi Beta Kappa who graduated with a double major be that naive?

By contrast, Molly (Shannon Stowe) is married to a man who adores her to death. But Danny is possessive beyond belief, so much so that he phones every two hours to check on her and won't allow her to have the child she so desperately wants. Molly has her own issues. She grew up rich and spoiled. To her the poor are "people who have to take the train to Florida." Molly is also having an affair -- and wears a provocative merry widow to prove it.

While the play is set in the present, the set (designed by Ron Gasparinetti) and even the dialogue would seem to place it a couple of decades earlier. It's hard to believe that three contemporary, educated women would put up with such husbands. Besides, who serves lime Jell-O these days?

But then again, this is the Midwest, it's satire and it's great entertainment. Despite the improbability of the plot, what makes the play work, Buchser writes in the program notes, is that the three characters "are deeply complex women, full of sorrow, enthusiasm, exhaustion, talent, love, and hate, but most of all...they are real."

Alas, their offstage husbands -- played by a rotating cast that includes Dale Albright, John T. Aney, Steve Cortopassi, Thomas Gorrebeek, Tom Gough and Josh Sigal -- are not. But perhaps it's just as well. It certainly makes for interesting post-theater discussion.

What: "The Smell of the Kill," a play by Michele Lowe

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

When: Through Nov. 18, with shows at 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sundays. A talk-back with the cast is set for Sunday, Nov. 11.

Cost: Tickets are \$13-\$20.

Info: Go to www.dragonproductions.net or call 650-493-2006.

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