

Palo Alto Online Palo Alto Weekly: Like a rock (November 18, 2011)

Arts & Entertainment - Friday, November 18, 2011

Like a rock

'Stones' showcases local talent, but is weighed down by overly serious plot

by **Jeanie K. Smith**

"Stones in his Pockets," by Irish playwright Marie Jones, opened at the Dragon Theatre in Palo Alto last weekend to much anticipation, since it features two actors playing more than 15 roles, with different accents and genders and of course personalities. Tom Gough, chair of the Theatre Arts Department at Foothill College, and Robert Sean Campbell, a popular South Bay thespian named an "actor to watch" by the late Wave Magazine in 2010, get to use their agility and talent for two hours in this quirky play.

They begin as two extras on a movie shoot, a film that is revealed to be standard Hollywood fare with an Irish setting. Jake (Campbell) and Charlie (Gough) become acquaintances and then friends as they participate in the mind-numbing exercise of waiting for hours to do one minute's worth of filming. We learn enough of their pasts to know why they're both here, earning a few quid a day, hoping to catch a lucky break while rubbing elbows with Hollywood stars and moguls.

Each actor steps easily into the skin of other characters almost immediately, and usually signals the move with a change of hat, or sweater or headscarf. Sometimes the costume changes are distracting, and the truth is we scarcely need these visuals. The characters are so distinct, and individuated, and it's amazing to watch the actors' faces literally transform before your eyes. Amongst others, we meet the Hollywood star Caroline Giovanni, all liquid and sexy, the object of desire for all the lowly extras (Gough), and production assistant Ashleigh (Campbell), efficient and full of spit.

A mostly bare stage with a few boxes and chairs serves for all the various locations, and a plain muslin backdrop reflects changing light to help distinguish scenes.

As the story unfolds, we hear Jake's and Charlie's dreams and aspirations, and see them run up against the other characters: resisting the authority of the film crew, lusting after Caroline (and Jake getting up close and personal), and bonding with other extras. A side

plot having to do with Jake's drugged-out cousin Sean takes center focus later in Act One, and is a catalyst in moving Jake and Charlie to find their own destinies.

Playwright Jones captures something essential to Ireland and the Irish sensibility, but it's also endearingly familiar, reminding us all of our tendency toward inertia and limited thinking about our capabilities. She uses humor and the device of actors playing multiple roles to distract us while bringing her message home.

Gough and Campbell are both hugely talented, and it's great fun at first to watch them move like chameleons from role to role, often with remarkably subtle gestures and facial expressions. But the device can wear thin if the characters are always exactly the same in every incarnation. Even Ashleigh and Caroline need to evolve as the plot develops.

There's also a great deal of shouting that tends to nullify potential humor. In addition, the scene turns too deadly serious in Act Two, losing much of its charm and poignancy.

Still, director Meredith Hagedorn and her actors are to be commended for tackling this challenging piece of meta-theatre. Those who appreciate the difficulty of tackling all those roles will enjoy seeing Gough and Campbell strut their stuff.

What: "Stones in his Pockets," by Marie Jones, presented by Dragon Productions Theatre Company

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

When: Through Dec. 4, with 8 p.m. shows Thursday through Saturday and 2 p.m. matinees on Sundays

Cost: Tickets range from \$16 to \$30.

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