

A thoughtful 'memory'

Dragon actors deftly handle painful yet funny script

by Kevin Kirby

In Shelagh Stephenson's "The Memory of Water," currently on offer from Dragon Productions, three adult siblings gather at their childhood home following the death of their mother. What follows is much what one would expect: The sisters — physician Mary, homeopathic entrepreneur Theresa, and substance-abusing little sister Catherine — sort through their mother's belongings, bicker over the funeral wreath, and rehash a lifetime of slights, rivalries and misunderstandings.

The territory is hardly original. It's a scenario that has launched a thousand weepy chick flicks. "The Memory of Water," though, is not a weepy play. It is, in fact, quite funny.

Stephenson, who lost her own mother during the genesis of this script, knows how closely laughter and loss are tied. What most distinguishes the play (winner of the 2000 Laurence Olivier Award for best comedy) is its ability to elicit riotous laughter from this painful material in a way that feels completely natural.

The cast, of course, deserves a great deal of credit for making the comedy work. Meredith Hagedorn as Mary, Laura Jane Bailey as Theresa, and Janine Evans as Catherine — as well as Noel Wood as Theresa's husband, Frank — all understand that in order to get laughs out of this material, they must not play it for laughs. All of them commit fully to the fear, pettiness and self-absorption of these deeply wounded characters, allowing the humor to take care of itself.

The other two members of the cast have less opportunity for humor. Lessa Bouchard (in far too much age makeup for the small Dragon space) is the girls' departed mother, Vi — or, more accurately, an interactive remnant pulled from Mary's memory. And Patrick Borella is Mary's married boyfriend, Mike, a doctor and minor TV personality.

There is no perceptible chemistry between Borella and Hagedorn, and his character lacks any of the charm that might make an otherwise intelligent professional woman waste her life on a philanderer. As a result, the subplots involving Mary's personal life (to which Stephenson has devoted much of the script) lose some of their impact.

But the play is concerned with far more than Mary's love life, as, in the vaguely inappropriate arena of their dead mother's bedroom, the sisters let loose a torrent of bitter emotions and long-held secrets. Jumbled up among the laughs are moments of real pain and revelation. Stephenson's script stops short of catharsis, though, and eschews tidy resolution. In the end, it's not clear that anyone is better off for having "gotten it all out." At most, they may have exchanged one hurt for another.

Central to the play is the issue of memory. There are passing references to Alzheimer's and amnesia, but Stephenson is primarily interested in the interplay between memory and emotion.

Throughout the show, the sisters tussle over their mismatched recollections of childhood. "I wish you'd stop remembering things that didn't happen," Mary tells Theresa. Later, she insists that "We all had the same childhood," despite the fact that their individual impressions of it differ wildly.

Similarly, in one of several dreamlike sequences, Vi complains that her daughters "invent these versions of me, and I don't recognize myself."

It's a family dynamic that everyone will recognize — the disputes that arise over common history viewed through disparate filters. The Dragon cast captures the phenomenon effectively, just as they capture the sense of unreality in the aftermath of a loved one's passing.

Director Ana-Catrina Buchser has done a lovely job shaping the piece, subtly varying the rhythm of the scenes and keeping the staging organic, clear and engaging in a small, static space. Ron Gasparinetti's set is serviceable, costumes by Magenta Brooks are generally good, and lighting designer Gerald "rover" Spotts sets the mood for the dream/memory sequences by projecting on the walls a shifting pattern of light reflected off water.

Uncredited dialect coach Shannon Stowe deserves kudos for whipping the cast's British accents into shape. The actors' dialects are fairly consistent and — with the exception of Borella, who does not attempt the dialect at all — well matched. (Bailey and Evans, in particular, have a good ear for the cadences of lower-middle-class British speech.) To help those audience members who may not have grown up listening to the BBC, someone at Dragon has put together an enjoyable program insert that explains the characters' British idioms.

Funny, thoughtful and well-acted, "The Memory of Water" is a fine example of what Dragon does best: contemporary theater on a budget, presented in an intimate setting where you can savor every nuance.

What:"The Memory of Water," a play presented by Dragon Productions

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

When:Thursdays-Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m., through Sept. 13

Cost:\$20 general admission, \$16 for students and seniors

Info:For more information, or for ticketing online, go to www.dragonproductions.net/tickets.html. For 24/7 box office help, call 800-838-3006.



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