

Talkin' Broadway Regional News & Reviews: San Francisco - "The Birthday Party" - 6/10/14



The Birthday Party

Pinteresque Party

Dragon Productions

Also see Patrick's review of *South Pacific*

Dragon Productions' new Second Stage Series logs another excellent entry with *The Birthday Party*, a classic Pinter play produced and directed by Jenny Hollingworth. Shocking and mystifying when it premiered in 1958, Harold Pinter's second full-length play went on to garner critical acclaim and become his most-often produced work. It's doubtful today's audience would find anything about it shocking, but mystifying?—absolutely, but in an intriguing, captivating way, especially when delivered by a company that speaks fluent Pinter.



Avi Jacobson and Paul Stout

Petey (Tom Bleecker) and Meg (Celia Maurice) run a seaside boarding house somewhere on the English south coast, with a sole boarder, Stanley (Paul Stout). Stan is treated more like a son, especially by Meg, but he hardly returns the affection—he's rough and downright nasty to her, although she seems not to mind, in her spacey sensibility. Stan

apparently is a lounge pianist, currently unemployed, but possibly about to have a job, possibly not. Pinter's characters spout exposition and contradictions in equal measure, leaving you to wonder where the truth lies—this ambiguity fuels an ongoing sense of menace, the constant lingering question of reality.

Enter two strangers, who may be here by chance, or maybe not—Goldberg (Avi Jacobson) and McCann (Brian Levi), dressed more like con men or funeral directors than seaside visitors. They may or may not have known Stanley before; they may or may not have plans for him that aren't pretty. Again, the sense of menace builds as the two men sabotage Stanley's birthday party that Meg put together, turning it into a heart-stopping deadly game, throwing young neighbor Lulu (Monica Ammerman) and Meg into danger as well.

Director Hollingworth has the pulse of Pinter—the show is tightly paced and good at keeping us guessing. Act three feels a tad nonchalant in the aftermath of the party, but comes to a fitting end. She has also cast her show extremely well—the ensemble are well fitted to their characters, and seem to have a clear understanding of their contributions to the ambiguity. Accents are sometimes a bit less clear, but that's a minor quibble. With some fine acting, the show maintains intrigue and interest throughout.

Set by Carlos Aceves makes good use of the Dragon space, using house aisles as well as onstage doors, and nice partials for kitchen and upstairs. William Campbell's lighting design aids significantly in the slightly sinister nature of the piece, and is extremely effective in act two. Stephen Davies on sound, Durand Garcia on fights, and Victoria Weber on properties all do a fine job. Lisa Lowe adds some delightful costuming touches in her overall excellent design.

Because it's a Second Stage production, it only runs two weekends, through June 15th. If you know Pinter, you'll definitely appreciate it; if you don't know Pinter, you'll want to see the play that made him a literary legend for our time.

The Birthday Party by Harold Pinter, presented by Dragon Productions' 2nd Stages Series, 2120 Broadway Street, Redwood City. Tickets \$15 for all seats, available at dragonproductions.net. or 650-493-2006.

Photo: James Kasyan

- Jeanie K. Smith