

Fiction

"**Fiction**" at the Dragon Theatre in Redwood City opens with one of the most gripping and terrifying scenarios we can imagine. And yet, it's as seemingly quiet and nondescript a setup as any you'll ever find.

Linda, a somewhat successful writer and teacher (Laura Jane Bailey, previously of "Mud Blue Sky" in Berkeley), finds out she has about three weeks to live. This is actually not the terrifying part, no strap in.

Husband Michael (Michael Shipley), a hugely successful writer in his own right, is also a compulsive journal keeper. Linda's last wish before she dies is that she wants to read all of them finally.

Just imagine spending ten years recording deeply private thoughts under the assumption they'll never be read, and then having the person who knows you best consuming all of them in one night.

In emotional terms, that is "Texas Chainsaw Massacre" levels of terror. Death has got nothing on the perils of unvarnished honesty.

Incredibly prolific playwright Stephen Dietz displayed some acts of profound sadism in "On Clover Road" earlier this year at SF Playhouse, but we'd still rather be the protagonist of that play than this one.

So from the moment of that setup we were hooked. How can you not be on the edge of your seat wondering what in the hell she's going to find out when she reads those diaries? Who could look away?

Mike is a brash, self-important dork who tries to compensate for his social awkwardness with the grace of a three-legged bull.

Linda is a sharp and cagey observer of other people, channeling her own insecurity into a penetrating sense of empathy. You'd imagine she knows

Mike pretty well. But you never know everything, do you?

We shouldn't give away too much about what happens next. But since the only other member of the cast is Emily Keyishian (previously the Female Engineer in "Adventures in Tech), playing the head a writer's retreat where Mike wrote his first book and another sharp woman who sees him coming from a mile away, you can probably guess where at least some of this is going.

Sadly, because of the way the play unfolds, Keyishian's part ends up being largely a confined one, never affording her enough material to run with.

And to be honest, the rest of the play never lives up to the promise of its starkly terrifying premise either. Michael's secrets, when we get them, seem contrived. (As contrived as being a compulsive diary-writer in the first place - - does anyone really do that these days?)

Linda's big secret seems equally artificial, more something Dietz invented because he needed an ending than something that really makes sense for the character.

Jane Bailey's confidence and poise on stage are fascinating, and the way she provokes sympathy with the most reserved of expressions and body language is priceless. Shipley's fidgety guardedness is a little intriguing too, at least in a compulsive way.

But they don't much hit it off or seem like a couple with the kind of overwhelming chemistry together that the show demands. Scenes of their happier days together don't feel genuine. Only when the actors are alone -- of desperately wishing they were alone -- does it come off as sincere.

Of course, we might just be feeling defensive because a play like this can't help but get you thinking about your own past and secrets. (Not that we've got anything to hide...)

As an experiment in playing with your nerves, "Fiction" excels. But we wish

there was more meat on its bones.

"Fiction" runs through December 18 at the Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway in Redwood City. For tickets and information, call 650-493-2006 or visit DragonProductions.net