

Entertainment

A dying request makes for compelling theater at the Dragon

“Fiction” by Steven Dietz enlivened by fine performances



Laura Jane Bailey as Linda, Emily Keshian as Abby and Michael Shipley as Michael in the Dragon Theatre production of “Fiction,” running through Dec. 18, 2016. (Kimberlee Wittlieb/Dragon Theatre)

By **JOANNE ENGELHARDT**

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Like the “Little Engine That Could,” Dragon Productions Theatre on Broadway in Redwood City just keeps churning out thoughtful, well-acted, serious plays, such as “Fiction” by Steven Dietz, which runs through Dec. 18 (and is definitely not your usual holiday fluff).

Dietz, a prolific American playwright who this year received a Steinberg New Play Award Citation for his play “Bloomsday,” has been featured twice before at Dragon (“Becky’s New Car” in 2013 and “Private Eyes” in 2011). His refreshing way of using colorful dialogue carries into “Fiction.”

Linda (a compelling, genuine Laura Jane Bailey) and Michael (steady, earnest Michael Shipley) meet at a Paris café, and banter, flirt, argue over whether John Lennon’s “Twist and Shout” or Janis Joplin’s “Piece of My Heart” is the best rock song ever, and then part (with Michael remembering Linda as “excruciatingly vibrant,” yet writing in his diary something much more mundane).

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Fast forward to an advanced fiction workshop led by Linda, now the author of a well-respected first novel (and also Michael’s wife). Turns out both Linda and Michael are writers, or at least wannabes.

It’s likely by now the audience is sensing that the title (“Fiction”) is about writing fiction ... or is it? Or perhaps what they’re witnessing on stage is fiction. Or??

Dietz’s little creation is full of plot twists and unexpected turns, rather like peeling an onion one layer at a time. But there’s also that time-travel thing where sometimes the audience is watching something that occurred 15 or 20 years ago, then the next scene happens in the present.

So it's important to stay focused from one sequence to the next, because that's what will be taking place over and over during the play's two-hour (one intermission) running time.

Just when it appears as if Linda and Michael are (maybe) living their dream life as writers, they learn from Linda's doctor that she has a brain tumor and likely has just three weeks to live (which Linda prefers to think of as 21 more meals).

A simple "dying" request by Linda — she asks Michael if she can read his diaries, his journals from the 20 years they've been together — turns out to be a pivotal story point. Michael is hesitant because, he tells the audience, "None of us, given a good hard look, can *not* disappointment." She reads them and discovers ... facts? Fiction? Both?

That's for the audience to determine as the plot thickens, so to speak. And that's when the only other person in this play shows up: the alluring, guarded Abby (beautifully understated performance by Emily Keyishian) who runs Drake Colony, a retreat where writers and would-be writers go to have the solitude and time to write.

It turns out that Linda was there first, wrote her novel, "At the Cape," which went on to become a best-seller. A few years later Michael also goes to Drake Colony and comes to some interesting conclusions (courtesy of Dietz): "Writers don't want to write. They just want to *be* writers," and "As a writer, I'm only good at two things: envy and criticism."

Both Laura and Michael have much deeper connections with Abby, though much of that isn't revealed until play's end.

There are actually so many emotions and entanglements in "Fiction" that it's best to allow audiences to discover (and ponder) them in real time. It's engrossing, it's riveting, it's good theater thanks to a taut script, a trio of meticulous actors and the steady guiding hand of director Erin Gilley.

Jesse Ploog's spare set (on two levels) works fine, both for the Paris café and for the Watermans' home. But it does seem odd that whatever age the characters are portraying (20 years ago or present day), costume designer Patricia Austin has them wearing the same clothes, albeit occasionally with the addition of a shawl, sweater or jacket. It's likely that's because the actors shift frequently from one time period to another — and back again — but a little more differentiation might be a good thing.

Both Marc Blinder's sound and Dan Garrett's lighting are valuable additions.

"Fiction" is part of what Dragon Productions calls its "2nd Stages Series," so it only runs three weekends. Why not take a short break from all things Christmas and explore this totally absorbing production?

Email Joanne Engelhardt at joanneengelhardt@comcast.net.

Theater

What: "Fiction"

Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Through: Dec. 18

Tickets: \$15-30; 650-493-2006 or

www.dragonproductions.net

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