

Uploaded: Wed, Dec 7, 2016, 11:11 am

## Stranger than 'Fiction'

Dragon's drama rewinds moments from a marriage

by Karla Kane / Palo Alto Weekly

According to playwright Steven Dietz, "there are really three 'pasts' -- the past we remember, the past that we record and the past that actually happened. I think they are seldom the same thing." The blurry lines between truth, fiction and memory are explored and displayed to riveting effect in Dietz's "Fiction," as staged at Redwood City's Dragon Theatre.

Long-married writers Linda and Michael (Laura Jane Bailey and Michael Shipley) have what appears to be a loving, healthy relationship after a fateful meet-cute, albeit one rift with plentiful competition and good-natured bickering. Their writing careers have taken different turns: Linda's first novel, a harrowing fictionalized memoir, was met with great acclaim but she's since worked mostly as a creative-writing professor. Michael, formerly in Linda's shadow (he doesn't even like the act of writing, he confesses at one point, he just likes to *have written*, to call himself a writer), has become the kind of bestselling author with tons of blockbuster movie adaptations to his name that he once purported to loathe.

When Linda is diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor and given only weeks to live, she asks Michael to read her extensive journals after her death, seeking some sort of immortality through her writings. Michael agrees but is rattled to learn that, in her time left, Linda also wishes to read his own diaries. And, of course, there are long-suppressed secrets within their words, just waiting to be revealed. At the centerpoint of those secrets is Abby Drake (Emily Keyishian), the cool and enigmatic writer's-workshop administrator who serves as a muse of sorts to both Linda and Michael in various ways.

Through Dietz's clever construction (and Erin Gilley's direction at the Dragon), the audience gains a window into moments from different periods of Linda and Michael's lives, most notably in the form of scenes from their journals. To differentiate the various time periods, the top and back of the Dragon Theatre's stage serves as Linda and Michael's home in their "present." One side of the lower stage represents a cafe in Paris and on other side, a desk serves as Abby's surprisingly important writing colony. When the house lights brighten, Linda becomes a lecturer at a university and the audience her students.

Strong performances anchor the show. Bailey is a force of nature as the feisty, bold Linda. It's easy to see why Shipley's quick-witted, slyly self-deprecating Michael would be attracted to her. The two have good chemistry and it makes sense that their relationship involves equal parts affection and combat, as we see them revel in wordy arguments over trivial matters, their barbed banter crackling with seduction. Nice touches in Dragon's production help further show their personalities. Michael's journals are uniform in style (plain black), painstakingly organized and kept in labeled, chronological order. Linda's, on the other hand, are a hodgepodge of sizes, patterns and colors and stored chaotically. Keyishian as Abby gives a more understated performance. It's unclear, at first, what it is (besides physical attraction) that makes her so



Michael Shipley and Laura Jane Bailey play a married couple in "Fiction." Photo by Scott Ragle.


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irresistible and worthy of comparisons to great muses throughout literary history. Abby, though, is willing to do what others perhaps are not call out Linda and Michael for their aggrandizements, hyperboles and inflated egos and that makes her quietly powerful.

In Dietz's script, the characters deliver too-clever dialogue and diatribes at high speeds (akin to an episode of "Gilmore Girls"), throwing out pretentious references left and right and, in the hands of less appealing actors, could become quickly tiresome. Does anyone, audience members may find themselves wondering, really speak this way? But that's just the point. These characters are writers, after all. No matter how their real-life conversations may have played out, the versions they invent for themselves can be as improbably articulate and smoothly delivered as they like. We are constantly our own memories' editors, constructing and deconstructing our versions of reality.

So how much of what Linda and Michael write (and read) about their pasts -- and how much of what we, as the audience, see -- is actual fact, how much is misremembered or misinterpreted half-truth and how much is pure fiction? There's no way to be sure (and to speculate too much would be to spoil much of the play's pleasure), but attempting to mentally unravel the tangled web of marital drama makes for top-quality entertainment.

**What:** "Fiction"

**When:** Through Dec. 18, Thursday-Saturdays at 8 p.m.; Sundays at 2 p.m.

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

**Cost:** \$25-\$30

**Info:** Go to [Dragon Theatre](#)

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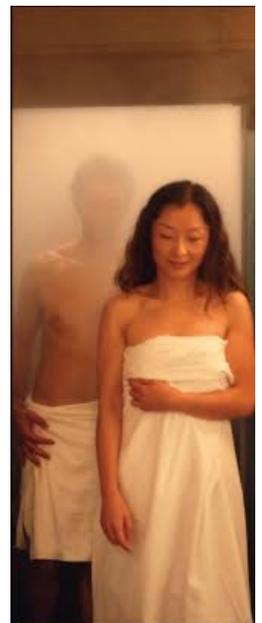
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