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## Dragon Theatre Provides a Fiery Theatrical Presence on the Peninsula



Felix Abador (Pastor Hidge) and Mary Price Moore (Rose) in Dragon Theatre's 2nd Stages production of 'Too Much, Too Much, Too Many' (Photo: Kimberlee Wittlieb)

By **Brandon Roos** (<http://ww2.kqed.org/arts/author/broos/>)

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From behind a closed door, Emma introduces her mother Rose to fresh-faced Pastor Hidge, a man committed to connecting with a woman who's locked herself away from the world for six months in the wake of her husband's death. Rose, reading in her room, offers only silence — a ploy common for Emma, yet new to Hidge.

Such begins the slow-burn tension that permeates Meghan Kennedy's debut play at Redwood City's [Dragon Theatre](http://dragonproductions.net/) (<http://dragonproductions.net/>), *Too Much, Too Much, Too Many*, which offers a nuanced take on the towering effects of grief.

While director Nancy McClymont knew Dragon Theatre's intimate, 65-seat black box space was a great fit for the material, she was worried the heavy subject matter of Kennedy's drama might not be a huge draw.

“I didn’t know if 11 audiences would be interested enough in grief,” McClymont says. Instead, she was surprised to see how well the story connected with patrons. “So many people have reached out to me to tell me their stories – how they were particularly touched by the play and why it mattered to them.”

### **Taking risks — in Redwood City**

Dragon Theatre prides itself finding receptive audiences for work that frequently involves taking creative chances, like its recent production of *Lo Speciale*, an obscure Baroque opera by Franz Joseph Haydn that the company set in a squalid meth lab, *Breaking Bad*-style.

On May 6, Dragon Theatre continues its season with *When the Rain Stops Falling*, a family saga whose timeline stretches from 1959 to 2039. With a story that jumps between past, present and future, the plays explores whether we’re able to deviate from the past, or if we’re doomed to re-live patterns that seem to be embedded in our DNA.

The relatively daring programming choices are no mean feat for an arts organization located in downtown Redwood City — a place that has a small, burgeoning arts scene, but can hardly be considered a cultural metropolis. Yet it’s that healthy appetite for risk, coupled with a constant desire to highlight unsung narratives, that has helped Dragon Theatre to gain traction in the peninsula’s performance landscape.

“Being that type of a company in Redwood City — that alone is pretty unusual,” says Brad Erickson, executive director of the regional performing arts support organization, Theatre Bay Area. “I think they’re having an impact both in the field and the city in a way that’s pretty impressive for a relatively small company.”



Kelly Battcher (Emma) and W. Scott Whisler (James) in Dragon Theatre's 2nd Stages production 'Too Much, Too Much, Too Many.'  
(Photo: Kimberlee Wittlieb) (Photo: Kimberlee Wittlieb)

It's a road-map artistic director Meredith Hagedorn has followed since founding Dragon Theatre 15 years ago. While leading a then-nomadic company that essentially lived out of her car, Hagedorn hoped to build a space for her work in the middle of downtown Palo Alto.

At a Palo Alto Chamber of Commerce mixer, Hagedorn found someone willing to lease her space, which the director transformed into a 2500 square foot, 42-seat theater within walking distance of downtown Palo Alto's busy University Avenue. "The main reason it was able to happen is because I really didn't know what I was getting into," Hagedorn says. "I really didn't know what it all meant. I just knew that I would need to learn a lot."

Hagedorn felt her company had maxed out its revenue potential in the tiny University Avenue space. So in 2012, she moved Dragon Theatre to its present location in Redwood City.

### **The local theatrical landscape**

The venue is located a block from the historic Fox Theatre, which periodically houses musicals produced by the local musicals producer Broadway by the Bay. Redwood City Community Theatre, another nearby company, is similarly focused on crowd-pleasing fare.

“There has been a plan in the works for a long time to really encourage and support the presence of art and culture downtown,” says Alicia Jeffrey, executive artistic director for Broadway By the Bay. “With the success that we see, and the success and interest that Dragon sees, I think it’s paying off. I think we’re lucky to have each other in that one block.”

By contrast, Dragon Theatre consistently tackles edgier material — Hagedorn mentions Shotgun Players in Berkeley and Custom Made Theatre in San Francisco as companies with a similar intention of creating high quality productions whose stories, as she puts it, stay “off the beaten path.”

However, taking creative risks is never stress-free. With an annual operating budget of \$350,000, Dragon Theatre is currently producing eight shows per season to maintain its space. The rent rises incrementally each year, but Hagedorn puts up with the elevated price of housing her company in a high-visibility location because she says it enables Dragon Theatre to forge essential community and commercial partnerships in addition to attracting curious passers-by.

But making rent is a constant concern. “I think about the bills and overhead every day,” she says. Luckily for Dragon Theatre, Hagedorn’s husband, who’s involved in the tech industry, has helped the company manage shortfalls at times. But Hagedorn says she and the theatre’s board are in the process of pursuing a long-term solution to the company’s current business model.

## **Nurturing talent**

Dragon Theatre’s output currently includes both fully professional shows and the “2nd Stages” series, which mentors emerging producers through the process of creating a full production from start to finish. The company offers space, marketing tools, set materials, and seed funding to program participants.

“Since I’ve been doing this now for many years, I want to share the love,” Hagedorn says. “That’s how Dragon began. I was looking for opportunities and couldn’t find them. There were stories I wanted to tell, so I knew I had to make them happen for myself.”

***Dragon Theatre’s next production, “When the Rain Stops Falling” opens Friday, May 6. [Details here](http://dragonproductions.net/)***

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