

A Good Reed Review



By Ande Jacobson

Paul Zindel's *And Miss Reardon Drinks a Little* isn't your typical play although the plot is largely drawn from Zindel's experience. He credits his early years with his eventually becoming a writer. He often retreated into his imagination to escape the drudgery of his family life after his father deserted them. He also had fortuitous timing as an undergraduate in taking a creative writing class taught by playwright Edward Albee who later became Zindel's valued mentor and friend. Although Zindel majored in chemistry, spent some time in industry, and later taught high school chemistry, he indulged his love of writing in his spare time. After his death, his New York Times obituary reported, "...he never went to the theater, he said, until he was already a published playwright."

Dragon Theatre tackles a story set in 1960 that is simultaneously zany, macabre, and disturbing surrounding the three Reardon sisters who aren't quite what you'd call soul mates. While all of them have careers in education, they achieved different levels of professional and personal success. Catherine (Sheila Ellam) and Anna (Lessa Bouchard) still live at home having recently lost their mother. Catherine is an alcoholic assistant principal, and Anna is a chemistry teacher at the same school. Their sister Ceil Adams (Kelly Reinhart) is a social climber and the school superintendent. Ceil has distanced herself from her family and holds herself above Catherine and Anna.

The interactions between the sisters are fraught with friction. Ceil invited herself to dinner to try to convince Catherine to have Anna committed to a psychiatric facility for treatment given her tenuous status after an undisclosed (and possibly misinterpreted) incident with one of her students. Mrs. Pentrano (Jean Conger), the building super's wife, drops by as Catherine is getting ready for Ceil's arrival. Then a delivery boy (Jon

Toussaint) brings groceries including a package of chopped meat which almost takes on a life of its own throughout the play. Mrs. Pentrano is still there when Ceil arrives, although she's quickly dismissed as Ceil begins her verbal assault. Ceil is later interrupted by nosy neighbors Fleur and Bob Stein (Mary Lou Torre and Kyle Wood respectively).

Richard Robles' set design is clean and functional. The play takes place in the Reardon's apartment in the combination living room/dining room area. The center of attention is the dining room table center stage. Upstage left is a bookcase/bar. Upstage right are a couch, an easy chair, side table, and bookshelf. Doorways upstage center lead to the kitchen and to the back of the house though both of those areas are unseen. The living room walls are period perfect with blue and cream stripes and an assortment of paintings and pictures (many of a religious nature) to finish off the room. The front door to the apartment is heavily used in the show, and Robles was creative by placing a doormat at the foot of the center aisle against the stage. Pantomime is used to unlock, open, and close the door quite effectively, and the aisle provides a viable front walkway.

Carson Duper's lighting design and Jonathan Covey's sound design work well with the set. Of particular note are the shifts to the front door whenever someone enters or exits the apartment. The lighting helps establish the entryway, and the sound effects accompanying any manipulation of the front door's hardware greatly reinforce the illusion. Another nice sound effect is the Plagal Cadence at the end of the show. It's not scripted that way, and the circumstance won't be disclosed here, but the musical emphasis provides an elegant touch.

Executive producer Meredith Hagedorn acknowledged that this production presented some interesting prop challenges. Several of the actors eat and drink throughout the performance, so those props had to be concocted to look real without poisoning the actors. While not necessarily delectable, the food and drink appear authentic thanks to Ruth E. Stein's creative prop design. Beware of the prop gun. While no actual bullets whiz by, it packs a startling bang.

Director Shareen Merriam pulled a talented cast into a very quirky production. Her cast is capable, and they all could project quite well in a much larger house.

Catherine seems the sanest of the main characters, and she's extremely articulate. Ellam

delivers several monologues detailing the events leading up to the evening at hand. Her description of hers and Anna's European adventure is very detailed and very funny. Ellam's delivery is matter-of-fact as she describes the ravings of her lunatic sister, both on vacation, and at school.

Anna is off the deep end suffering from acute hypochondria and paranoia as Bouchard bursts onto the scene and raises the volume level tens of decibels. Bouchard handles the physical nature of the role nicely, and she fortunately never trips on the couch or the chairs as she leaps on and off the furniture in the midst of Anna's mania. Bouchard's screaming gets a bit old at times, but her shrieks are in keeping with the characterization. Anna is easily upset, and Bouchard makes this abundantly clear. In one scene, she attacks Fleur's fur wrap with a vengeance, Anna having "caressed vegetarianism" as Catherine puts it.

Torre is marvelous as Fleur, in constant motion as she can't stop talking. Fleur's got an ulterior motive in stopping by the Reardon's apartment on the way to the ice show. She wants to meet Mrs. Adams to enlist her help in bettering her position. She prattles on about how she's eminently qualified and has the situation with "the boy" under control. When Bob shows up, he eventually tells the Reardon's about Fleur's dirty little secret, causing her to leave in disgrace but not before an extended and frantic scene.

Bob is coarse, bombastic, and probably dishonest, but the audience really doesn't know what makes him tick. Wood and Torre make an interesting couple, though one might wonder how they ever got married in the first place given Fleur and Bob's areas of dispute.

Rinehart's Ceil maintains an air of superiority that seems unearned. Ceil takes what she wants, and Rinehart uses very snappy motions, erect posture, and clipped speech to present her character's pseudo-aristocratic standing. Ceil is competitive and cold-hearted by nature. She stole Catherine's boyfriend many years before and eventually married him, not because she loved him, but because Catherine did. Rinehart also shows that Ceil isn't invincible. She's got some subtle nervous twitches that are evident when Ceil is losing an argument. It's interesting to watch Rinehart and Ellam square off in their sisterly battles, each with razor sharp wit, though at one point they join forces with Anna. While short-lived, the scene when the three sisters come together brings to mind the

Bedouin proverb: "Me against my brother, my brother and I against my cousin, and all of us against the stranger." Though their adversaries aren't strangers, they also aren't family.

Conger and Toussaint have cameo appearances early in Act 1 that help set up the situations to follow.

The play is a bit unsettling, but with many parts being uproariously funny it is entertaining though you may feel slightly guilty laughing at some of the jokes.

What: *And Miss Reardon Drinks a Little* by Paul Zindel

Where: Dragon Theatre located at: 2120 Broadway Street, Redwood City, CA 94063.

When: Thursdays – Sundays through 22 September 2013

See <http://www.dragonproductions.net> or call 650-493-2006 for more information.

(Photo courtesy of Dragon Theatre)

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