

Palo Alto Online Palo Alto Weekly: A witty win (September 21, 2012)

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A witty win

Dragon Production has a seamless, contemporary hit with 'The Little Dog Laughed'

by Kevin Kirby

Five years ago, Dragon Productions scored a hit with Douglas Carter Beane's hip satire "As Bees in Honey Drown," directed by Dale Albright. Now Albright is back with another Beane script — the enigmatically titled "The Little Dog Laughed" — and it's another clear win for Dragon.

The play centers on Mitchell, an up-and-coming Hollywood actor, and his hard-driving agent, Diane, both in New York City for an awards ceremony. While in town, Diane hopes to secure the film rights to a hot new Broadway play. Playing the gay protagonist in the film adaptation, she believes, will catapult Mitchell to stardom, winning him a reputation as a versatile, serious actor. (Think Heath Ledger in "Brokeback Mountain.")

Her plan will only work, though, if the public sees Mitch as a daring heterosexual actor taking on a gay role ... which means that Diane has her work cut out for her concealing her client's "slight recurring case of homosexuality."

Beane's script is witty and probing, skewering the indulgent narcissism of the film industry along with other worthy targets. The jokes come fast and furious, but they're smarter, more nuanced, than you might expect from the plot precis. His characters are simultaneously self-aware and self-deluded, and oddly likeable despite themselves.

To bring these complex human beings to the stage, Albright has gathered a cast of exceptionally talented actors, all of them new to Dragon.

Jennifer Lucas is marvelous as the Machiavellian Diane, delving into her rapid-fire, cut-throat, occasionally world-weary monologues with obvious relish. She finds a surprising amount of variety in a character who could have been — with weaker direction or a weaker actress — a one-joke stereotype.

William Giammona, as Mitchell, has the good looks and the affable personality that just might turn Mitch into a star. If Giammona's characterization lacks anything, it is a visible underlying hunger for success. But then, perhaps Diane is hungry enough for both of them.

Most of Giammona's scenes are played opposite Henry Robert Nolan as gay-for-pay Alex, a college-age rent boy whom Mitch "meets" through an agency called Manhattan School Boys. Both men self-identify as straight, but something about their (ultimately chaste) first encounter leaves them wondering. They meet again. And again. Neither seems to fully understand the feelings they have for each other, and Giammona and Nolan convey that uncertainty with a delicate touch.

But the real show-stealer here is Maria Giere Marquis as Alex's girlfriend, Ellen. Ellen is the very model of disaffected youth: alienated from her family, directionless, bored with clubbing, sponging off of an older lover who is unaware of her relationship with Alex. Saying that Marquis "gets" this character does not begin to communicate the depth to which she inhabits the role. She lands every punchline — not just the joke, but the sting behind it — then turns on a dime to show us real vulnerability beneath the determinedly ironic exterior. The show's only truly painful moments are hers, as when, at the end of the first act, she realizes that she is losing Alex.

For the other characters, the first act ends on an upbeat note — film rights secured, gay identities tentatively embraced, new romance abud — but we know it can't last. At the top of the second act, Diane riffs on the old play-writing axiom (attributed variously to Chekhov, Wilder, George M. Cohan, et al.), viz: "In Act 1, get your characters up a tree. In Act 2, throw stones at them. In Act 3, get them down again." She notes that the tree, in this case, "is happiness."

Sure enough, Mitch and Alex's happiness soon becomes problematic for everyone involved, and the stones begin to fly. Ultimately, it's up to Diane to get them down again. She accomplishes this through a masterful application of money, arm-twisting and faux empathy that any Hollywood dealmaker would be proud of, and the unexpected denouement that she engineers finally makes clear the play's oblique, anticipatory title.

Last Saturday's performance got off to a wobbly start. Lucas' opening monologue didn't drop into gear until halfway through; Nolan's initial rent-boy banter was sluggish; and Giammona's first-scene drunkenness wasn't quite believable. But this is a smart and well-rehearsed cast. Less than 10 minutes in, the audience was hooked into the story,

charmed by the less-than-charming characters, and laughing at Beane's insightful, lacerating jokes.

Alena Samoray's unit set is a nondescript hotel room — bed, bar, small table and chair — surrounded on three sides by a hip-high platform where all of the non-hotel scenes play out. It seems appropriate that the bed dominates, remaining front and center even when the action moves elsewhere; and the platform provides plenty of room for Diane's and Ellen's monologues, plus a handful of other, two-person scenes. The set is enclosed by a geometric grid of black, silver and porcelain blue, with the New York City skyline visible above and behind it all. It's an effective design, and, if the playing spaces are tight, Albright and his cast never let it show.

Costumer Rita Foster deserves kudos for dressing the actors in clothes that are character-appropriate, up to date, and — not necessarily a given in community theater — the right size. Light and sound design by Steve Shumway and Jeffrey Lo, respectively, contribute unobtrusively to a seamless production.

One would be remiss not to mention that this is Dragon Productions' penultimate show in Palo Alto; in January the company will be moving to Redwood City. So, for those who have enjoyed Dragon's work over the years, this is your next-to-last chance to take in a show at the narrow Alma Street storefront that has been the company's home since 2006.

And "The Little Dog Laughed" is certainly worth taking in. It's a perfect example of the type of small-but-ambitious, contemporary plays on which Dragon has built a reputation. Don't miss it.

What: "The Little Dog Laughed," a Douglas Carter Beane play presented by Dragon Productions

Where: Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St., Palo Alto

When: Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m., through Oct. 7

Cost: \$25 general admission, with discounts for students and seniors

Info: Go to dragonproductions.net or call 800-838-3006.