

Palo Alto Online Palo Alto Weekly: A heartfelt goodbye (November 16, 2012)

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A heartfelt goodbye

'March,' Dragon's last play in Palo Alto, is honest and compassionate

by Kevin Kirby

In February of 2006, Dragon Productions took up residence in a newly converted theater space on Alma Street in downtown Palo Alto. Its first offering in the space was "The Heidi Chronicles" by Wendy Wasserstein, a production that I had the honor to review. Now, nearly seven years later, I find myself reviewing "March," the final show that the company will present in its narrow, 42-seat black box theater before moving to a new, larger home in Redwood City next year.

In the intervening years, Dragon's fans (I include myself among them) have followed the company on many a journey. Dragon's shows have taken us to small-town Texas, Disney World, New Orleans and the Alaskan wilderness. We've visited a juvenile-detention facility, a terrorist's hideout and a peasant village in the Caucasus Mountains. We've made several trips to New York and the U.K., and spent an evening on a cruise ship in the north Atlantic. Along the way, Dragon's productions have explored everything from college politics to Gothic horror, from the evolution of humanoid lizards to the age-defying whimsy of children's author Shel Silverstein.

In their current offering, Sharyn Rothstein's "March," the company transports us to a location seldom seen on stage: cyberspace.

In many ways, "March" is a perfect example of the work that Dragon has presented over the past seven years. Like most of the plays chosen by Dragon founder and artistic director Meredith Hagedorn, it is a lesser-known, contemporary show featuring strong roles for women and inhabiting a middle ground between comedy and drama. And, like many of Hagedorn's choices, it is slightly more ambitious than the company can comfortably handle.

I hasten to add that this is in no way a bad thing. Hagedorn's grasp-exceeding reach has kept Dragon's seasons interesting, and I believe it has helped her draw a certain caliber

of talent to the theater: namely, performers who enjoy a challenge.

Certainly, the eight actors who make up the cast of "March" have several challenges before them. For Sam Bertken and Rasika Raghavan, who play Michael and Eva, two semi-troubled teens who meet in a simulated online world reminiscent of Second Life, the primary challenge is in playing not only the human characters but their pixel-world avatars as well. Anyone familiar with Second Life will appreciate their attempt to capture the limited repertoire of stiff poses that these avatars adopt. Bertken and Raghavan could have used more dedicated rehearsal time to hone their avatar schtick in front of a mirror, but the idea comes across.

Bertken has an added challenge. The actor is at least eight years too old for his role, and he's playing opposite Raghavan, who might plausibly be 14. Bertken is smart, energetic and wholly likable, and he makes Michael's exasperation at his dysfunctional family evident. But he never quite captures the sense of desperation that comes with being trapped in this family's home for at least three more years.

Challenges are also faced by Leticia Duarte and David Madwin, who play Eva's mother and Michael's older brother, respectively. Both characters suffer from some sort of mental illness, but playwright Rothstein never pins down a diagnosis for either.

Madwin's character is most likely schizophrenic with a strong dose of paranoia thrown in, and Madwin is at his best when in the grips of a particular delusion. As for Duarte's character, her family behaves as though she has a temper that keeps them living in fear, but we rarely see any hint of danger. Like Madwin, she is a strong performer when given a specific rant to deliver, but her overall performance has too much irony, too much self-awareness to justify her family's walking on eggshells. (Duarte also has the happy problem of being far too slim to play a character who, we are given to believe, is so obese that she is loathe to leave the house.)

These issues aside, the cast (which also includes George Mauro and Glenn Havlan as the teens' fathers, Janine Evans as Michael's mother, and Katie Zeisl as various real and virtual girls) rises to the task at hand, playing their roles with honesty and compassion, and landing enough of the key moments to solicit real laughs and tug on real heart-strings. It's a feat that I have watched numerous Dragon casts pull off over the years: finding the emotional heart of a piece despite difficulties in casting, staging, etc.

The technical elements, too, are typical of Dragon's work. Longtime collaborator Ron

Gasparinetti returns to design the play's minimal set. Constrained by the small stage, Gasparinetti has produced a handful of abstract set pieces that can be rearranged to form all of the play's locales. To create the online fantasy world inhabited by Michael and Eva's avatars, he uses rear-projected slides of virtual forests and pixel fortresses. (Rear projection has been a common element in Dragon scenic design ever since "The Heidi Chronicles.") As usual, the minimal approach is effective and the scene changes drag only slightly.

With limited props and set pieces, sound design is extremely important to this production. Actor George Mauro doubles as sound designer for "March," and he has done a splendid job of creating effects — everything from car doors to laser blasters — that enhance both the real and virtual worlds. The uncredited individual (stage manager Solia Martinez-Jacobs, perhaps?) who pushes the buttons in the booth deserves a nod as well; the timing of sound cues was spot-on at Friday's opening. My only objection to the sound design was the irritating, synthesized scene-change music, which was more reminiscent of early Atari video games than of the lush, multi-timbral orchestrations for modern computer games and simulations.

The cast and crew of "March," including director Lennon Smith and producer Hagedorn, have much to be proud of with this show. It is yet another example of what can be achieved by a committed group of artists willing to work on a shoestring. It's worth making one last visit to the Alma Street storefront theater.

As for the future, Dragon's new home is outside the Palo Alto Weekly's coverage area, so I am unlikely to ever review another Dragon production. But will I make the drive to Redwood City in January to see what this resourceful company can achieve in a larger venue? You bet I will. And so should you.

What: "March," a play presented by Dragon Productions

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

When: Thursday-Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m., through Dec. 2

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

Info: For more information, or for ticketing online, go to dragonproductions.net . For 24/7 box office help, call 800-838-3006.