

'Show People' gets audience rolling with laughter

For much of its two hours of running time, the little-known play "Show People," on stage through March 22 at Dragon Theatre in Redwood City, is laugh-out-loud funny. In fact, the premise of an over-the-hill acting couple taking on the role of the parents of a hot-shot entrepreneur who wants to impress his girlfriend is ripe for comedy.

Written by Paul Weitz, who is best known as a screenwriter and film director ("American Pie" and "About a Boy"), "Show People" was first produced off-Broadway in 2006. It hasn't yet gained traction in the Bay Area, but this production (with perhaps a bit of tightening in Act 2) could become a mainstay for small community theaters.

The striking contemporary set, ostensibly the Long Island home of the young tech tycoon Tom (a totally engaged and engaging Casey Robbins), showcases the inventiveness of set designer Kirsten Royston. The living room features a comfortable couch with soft orange cushions, mellow light-turquoise backlighting in the window, and an almost-too-short curved wrought-iron stairway that leads to a small hallway above.

Into this setting walk the elegantly trained (thanks to years in the theater) and frequently bickering Jerry and Marnie (Bill Davidovich and Monica Cappuccini). After watching the way they interact with each other, the audience will be hard pressed to envision anyone else playing their roles. They've got the theatrical airs, the arched-eyebrow look, the one-line zingers perfected.

Davidovich is a big presence both physically and in the way he gestures broadly. While he plays Jerry as a guy who is boisterous and amiable, he also gets it right when he has a quiet, more introspective scene in Act 2. As the more cynical, responsible one of the pair, Cappuccini scowls a lot and astutely deflates her hubby's more enthusiastic (sometimes amorous) endeavors. And she sure has a way of throwing out a plethora of witty, perfectly timed lines.

Sara Renee Morris is the fourth character in the play, Tom's girlfriend, Natalie, and is the only one whose story isn't as solidly fleshed out. Morris' interpretation shows her as gregarious, then guarded, then uncertain, and then outgoing again. At times she was too

hesitant on opening night, but seemed to better inhabit her character by the second act.

Without giving away the conceit of the script, it's enough to disclose that none of the four are who they seem at the start. But who they are and why they are doing what they're doing is revealed in layers, gradually taking the audience along for the ride.

Robbins' Tom is by far the most complex, with his Loony Tunes-ringing cellphone, his megadeal to sell his software company to Microsoft for gazillions, and the intrigue with which he has drawn this odd assortment of people into his web. Is he oddly eccentric, psychotically crazy or perhaps even sinister?

As Hamlet would say -- and as his feminine counterpart Natalie, doing an amusingly wooden rendering of the "To Be or Not to Be" speech, does say in Act 2 -- "Ay, there's the rub."

No matter. There's more than enough mirth to get past those passages that seem a bit strained. The one nit with the ending is that Weitz needs to come up with a more convincing explanation for why Tom has gone to all the trouble to concoct his carefully planned deception. It seems pretty lame.

All hands deserve credit for this production, from Austin Edgington's fast-paced direction, to Leonardo Hidalgo's lighting and Jesse Scarborough's sound. Jeff Hamby gives the actors just the right outfits to wear, with Cappuccini's pale yellow two-piece suit with pearls topping the charts.

Be alert for Weitz's droll lines (most of which are spoken by Cappuccini): "I'm not frigid. I'm just ... detached," and, when referring to Tom's strange antics, "Eccentric is wearing a bolo tie. This is nuts."

"Show People," has a short (less than 50 minutes) first act with Act 2 running more than an hour. It's all good.

Email Joanne Engelhardt at joanneengelhardt@comcast.net.

Theater

What: "Show People"Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Through: March 22

Tickets: \$30; 650-493-2006 or www.dragonproductions.net