

Shel Game

Dragon Theatre gets twisted with Silverstein's adult plays

IT IS a little too easy to be shocked by Shel Silverstein's plays. As is apparent just minutes into Dragon Theatre's *An Adult Evening of Shel Silverstein*, they are outrageous, ghoulish and full of dark, crude and sexual humor. For easily offended fans of Silverstein's children's works, such as *Where the Sidewalk Ends* and *The Giving Tree*, it may be too much. But for most of us who loved his stuff as a kid, it's a chance to see his genius in a totally different context and just confirms what a lot of us suspected all along: the dude is twisted.

When it comes down to it, these scenarios, despite their landscape of homicidal intent, paranoia, shifting identities, violence, sex and occasional foul language, deliver exactly what we expect from Shel Silverstein: imaginative flights of fancy, sharp wordplay and a unique way of looking at everyday situations. They are also, to embrace the spirit of the work, goddamn fucking hilarious. Director Kathleen Normington, who recently finished an engrossing production of Neil LaBute's *The Shape of Things* for Renegade Theatre Experiment, scores again with these 10 rapid-fire sketches drawn from two Silverstein collections. When the setups start with a young girl being presented with an insane birthday present in "The Best Daddy" and then move on to a hostage situation intended to punish the world's most insidious cultural criminal, you know you've stumbled on something weird and wonderful. What's most surprising, maybe, is how close some of these Silverstein pieces are to Monty Python territory, with characters arguing over uproariously absurd premises. You almost expect someone to wander in at some point with an ex-parrot.

The cast is fabulous; they can shine in frantic, big moments, in one piece, and then selflessly step into a bit role and let their co-stars have the floor in the next. Normington has brought Caitlin Dissinger over from her previous role as Jenny in *The Shape of Things*, and she's excellent once again. Her ability to play innocence with a hidden dark edge that always finds a way to surface helps her careen through two of the most extraordinary pieces, "The Best Daddy" and "The Lifeboat Is Sinking," where she drags her husband (played by Norman Luce) through one "bedroom experience" he'll never forget. Luce has a Bob Odenkirk-like Everyman quality that reminded me how much the humor here is like that mined by *Mr. Show*. He and the versatile Claire Slattery turn the finale into something as disturbing and haunting as it is funny. Meanwhile, the most laughs per minute come from Slattery and Joey Sandin's "Buy One, Get One Free," in which they play prostitutes with the most bizarre marketing campaign ever. The two other cast members, William J. Brown III and Drew Jones, are like the glue that hold the whole thing together—with their expressive faces and physical humor, they bounce through various pieces with the same childlike, unpredictable energy that defines Silverstein's work.



TWISTED TALES *Dragon Theatre uncovers the hidden side of Shel Silverstein in an evening of his adult plays.*

Steve Palopoli

AN ADULT EVENING OF SHEL SILVERSTEIN, a Dragon Theatre production, plays Thursday-Saturday at 8pm and Sunday at 2pm through Feb. 14 at Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St., Palo Alto. Tickets are \$20-\$25. (800.838.3006)