

Mixing badminton and politics for big laughs

It's surprising that a play that centers so much on badminton and politics can still be hysterically funny. Yet that's exactly what happens in the Dragon Productions Theatre Company's "Smash," playing through May 4 in Redwood City.

Loosely based on "An Unsocial Socialist," which is not considered one of George Bernard Shaw's better novels, it was turned into a marvelously inventive play by Jeffrey Hatcher in 1997.

It's important to be aware that this play has nothing to do with the television series of the same name that ran for about two years. Instead, the title apparently comes from a line in the play about the need to "smash" the old civilization.

And, while the setting is 1910 somewhere in jolly old England, the sensibilities and the humor are quite modern indeed.

The first scene, however, doesn't offer up much hope that the evening will be agreeable. Why on earth would a newlywed named Sidney Trefusis (a versatile, forceful William J. Brown III) abandon his lovely bride (the beauteous Katie Rose Krueger) 20 minutes after the ceremony just before they are to join their guests at a joyous reception?

His answer seems way too thin for such a momentous decision: "I can't be both a socialist and a husband." Umm ... hello? Didn't he know this before he said his "I do"?

Yet it's right after this scene -- when the setting shifts to an exclusive girls' boarding school (Alton College) and two young schoolgirls, Jane Carpenter (earnest Laura Henricksen) and snobbish Gertrude Lindsay (fresh-faced Kendall Callaghan), precariously skate in on roller skates -- that the story and the action rev up.

Enter the malevolent headmistress, Miss Wilson (an appropriately stodgy Shelley Lynn Johnson) in a wheelchair, spewing out spiteful invectives toward another school girl, Agatha Wylie (Sarah Benjamin). She even declares angrily, "Agatha Wylie will be taken down!" Both Johnson and Benjamin play their parts for broad laughs and succeed. by and large, although Benjamin would do well to avoid twisting her mouth so emphatically

that she mostly looks mean and unpleasant. A little of that goes a long way.

There are various and sundry side stories, particularly of the romantic kind, some having to do with an enthusiastic game of badminton (without rackets, a net or shuttlecocks), and it's pretty easy to predict which men and women will end up as twosomes.

There's the frequently sweaty love-struck poet Chichester Erskine (Brian Fledge) who's bonkers for Gertrude, and the rather euphonious Sir Charles Brandon (Evan Michael Schumacher) who shyly shows his affection for Jane.

Then Trefusis shows up at the school as a common laborer (and sporting an odd tuft of chin hair). He is working on his socialist plan to overthrow the British government by hiring the nearby city folk to storm the school grounds on Founder's Day. "Socialism," he tells the love-struck Wylie, "is the new world order of capitalism." Having become his political sidekick, Wylie responds, "Good comrade. My troops are always at the ready!"

Who shows up to thwart his capitalistic plan? None other than Henrietta Trefusis, the lovely -- and determined -- bride Trefusis left at the altar.

There are various and sundry other characters (Paul Stout as Henrietta's rich, pompous father Mr. Jansenius, and Nicolae Muntean as Lumpkin, the lazy groundskeeper at the school), and they do their bit to bring mayhem and malarkey to the already wacky plot.

It's sometimes difficult to keep up with the frenetic pace of the piece, but director Vickie Rozell makes sure no one will fall asleep during "Smash." Apart from the more serious theme of politics, Rozell helps the audience understand what Hatcher has to say about male-female relationships, the working class vs. the wealthy, and more.

There is also a ton of genuinely funny one-liners (often out of the mouth of the boorish Mr. Jansenius) that are bound to produce plenty of laughter. A sampling:

- "Ignorance is an undervalued commodity."
- "I respect the honest words of my menials."
- "Love is capital. Marriage is a business."

Michael Palumbo's set design is simple (three high walls covered with ivy) yet adaptable. Y. Sharon Peng creates memorable costumes both for the foppish men and the elegantly gowned Krueger. But the male facial hair (Brown's chin whiskers and Schumacher's unusual muttonchops) could use a little fine-tuning.

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Theater

What: "Smash"

Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City

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

Through: May 4

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