

Phenomenal acting makes 'Take Me Out' a must-see

As part of Dragon Theatre's new 2nd Stages season, "Take Me Out" runs a scant two weeks, so there are now only four more performances left, Friday through Sunday.

It's definitely worth getting to Redwood City to see, thanks to several phenomenal acting performances, as well as playwright Richard Greenberg's take-no-prisoners script. Surprisingly, this play is only 12 years old, yet so much has changed in a dozen years that director Ken Sonkin points out in his program note that "Take Me Out" could almost be considered a "period" play.

That's because in those dozen years, 19 states have legalized same-sex marriage, and nearly every American sport now has one (or more) openly gay athletes.



Brandon Jackson, left, and Ryan O'Donnell in "Take Me Out," at Dragon Theatre in Redwood City, July 11-20, 2014.

(www.fistfullofphotos.com)

And yet, there is still a very long road ahead for any person who wants to have a big-league sports career if he (and, to a lesser degree, she) comes out.

Greenberg's luminous dialogue is a joy to hear, so it's no surprise that "Take Me Out" was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize in drama, won three 2003 Tony Awards (including best play), and a slew of Drama Desk awards.

The play primarily takes place in the Empires baseball team locker room, shortly after the star of the team announces quite unexpectedly that he is gay. Some of his teammates support him unconditionally, while others take longer before they again feel comfortable around him. There's a lot of drama both on and off the field that year, and there are tragic circumstances in the end.

It's to director Sonkin's credit that he selected a nearly ideal 11 men to play the Empires (as well as the team manager and a financial manager for the star of the team). As the socially inept money manager Mason Marzac, Dale Albright hits it out of the park in this

role. He's got the quirks, the gushes, the dazed expression of talking to a baseball star down to a T. It's sheer delight to watch Albright blossom as he first discovers the joys of baseball, then bounds over the top with his love of the game.

As the play's narrator and ball player/philosopher Kippy Sunderstrom, Ryan O'Donnell hits at least a triple. He's always grounded, always sincere and provides some much-needed background to the play's story.

Rory Strahan-Mauk also rounds the bases as the sulking, steely-eyed wacko relief pitcher, Shane Mungitt. Strahan-Mauk never disappoints, whether spewing his hate-filled, offensive remarks to the press about his "faggot" teammate, or later, when breaking down in sobs when he learns he'll never pitch again in the big leagues. Strahan-Mauk is so authentic, he somehow makes the uneducated redneck Mungitt a sympathetic figure at times.

Then there's Brandon Jackson as Darren Lemming, the just-outed star player. Jackson is an enigma. Granted, as a closeted ball player, Darren would have had to keep his personal life very private. Jackson's got that aloofness down pat. Yet even when he's meeting with his buddy Davey Battle (a subdued and sometimes hard-to-hear Russell E. Johnson) or Kippy, his best friend on the Empire team, Jackson is so detached he looks bored.

There comes a point in this production when the audience may want to slap Jackson over the head and tell him to show some emotion. That he is so stoic, so disdainful of others and so completely devoid of feeling diminishes this play, which was (and still is) a powerful statement not only about homophobia but also about racism, jock masculinity and class barriers.

Fortunately, Jackson eventually loosens up a bit, displaying a cockeyed sense of humor when he befriends the befuddled Albright. Several times he strings along his awe-struck money manager until finally revealing that he's "just goofin' on ya." That's about as close to an emotion he shows, until he later comes to grips with the knowledge that he had an unintentional part in the tragedy that takes place.

Jon Deline provides the comic relief as the chubby ballplayer Toddy Koovitz, who can't quite seem to stop himself from putting his foot in his mouth every time he opens it. Andrew Chung as the Japanese pitcher Takeshi Kawabata speaks Japanese so fluently he leaves the audience wondering whether he really only knows a few words in English. Other ballplayers in the cast seem at home in the locker room, even while "showering" wearing nothing but a jock strap and (somewhat) covered by a small modesty panel.

Yes, there is some degree of nudity in the show, so let the audience beware (and don't bring young children).

The Empires locker room looks authentic enough, thanks to scenic/properties designer Jennifer Varat, who devised a way to make a second story useful for a few of the scenes. Director Sonkin's sound design works well, not always easy to accomplish in the unusual Dragon theater space. There are a few times when Selina G. Young's lighting is too muted, but, for the most part, it is effective.

As the in-awe baseball nut newbie, Mason (Albright) gets to say the kinds of things all diehard baseball fans say -- only he says them more eloquently. It's the playwright himself who likely believes that "baseball is the perfect metaphor for hope," and is also the "equality of chance."

Powerful stuff, and well delivered here.

One suggestion for Dragon: Next time when a play as thought-provoking and significant as "Take Me Out" is produced, bump it up to a regular main season offering. It deserves it.

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Theater

What: "Take Me Out"

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

When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

Through: Sunday

Tickets: \$15; 650-493-2006 or www.dragonproductions.net