

Regarding Arts, theater



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

'Take Me Out' a grand-slam game-winner at the Dragon

But hurry up! 2nd Stages production only has four shows left, and one is sold out; go see this excellent play

By John Orr

July 14, 2014

Get thee to the theater — Dragon Theatre, specifically — no later than Sunday, to see its 2nd Stages production of Richard Greenberg's "Take Me Out."

It's a great, beautifully written play, and the 11 people in this cast are fabulous.

2nd Stages is a very cool program the Dragon began this year to allow theater people to produce their dream projects. The Dragon gives each producer \$3,000 in seed money, the theater itself for a certain amount of rehearsal time, production advice, and then each show runs for just two weeks. (There is a rumor that it might extend to three weeks

in 2015. And just today it was announced that Karen Atree Piemme, who spent 21 years with the now defunct San Jose Rep, has been hired to run Dragon's 2nd Stages program.)

"Take Me Out" is the dream production of Dale Albright, who also performs a key role in the play, which is directed by Ken Sonkin. It is the story of Darren Lemming, a great player who signs the richest contract in Major League Baseball, then decides to come out of the closet.

Much drama, and a healthy amount of comedy, ensue.

In his director's note, Sonkin says "This is a period play. It is now considered to be 'old' because when it was written back in 2002, the gay community in this country had little to no rights."

I beg to differ with whoever considers this play to be old. It is, in fact, timeless, because it deals with any form of prejudicial behavior, the meaning of friendship, and the love of baseball.

It is a rich piece of work, and at two and a half hours (including two intermissions), it has a lot to say, and there is no wasted time in it. It is thoroughly entertaining, and gets better and more meaningful as it rounds the bases.

Brandon Jackson — who was excellent in "Superior Donuts" at The Pear in Mountain View, then directed an amazing "Cabaret" at Broadway By The Bay — is deeply real as Lemming, who is maybe a little put off by the over-reaction to his openness. "I am still me," he says. "I am still a man."

He is helped in the locker room by Kippy Sunderstrom, who is probably the most intelligent man in baseball. Ryan O'Donnell is hugely effective in this role, which also serves to narrate a good deal of the play.

Kippy's intelligence and humanity are key factors in this equation, because a lot of the guys in the locker room are as dumb as a box of rocks. What another player is spouting, he says, is "The Poetry of the Ignoramus."

Most of the team get used to having a gay man on the team easily enough, especially since he's the best player, by far, coming close to batting .400 through the course of the play.

Among the emotional territory explored by this play is the loneliness of the star pitcher, Takeshi Kawabata, who doesn't speak English, except for "Strike 1, strike 2, strike 3." Andrew Chung is powerful in the role.

Tony Ortega and Bobby Lopez play a couple of Spanish-speaking players who at least have each other to talk with.

One of the best scenes involves the two Spanish speakers miming various sexual acts in front of the other players, especially Kawabata, who is depressed about having lost a game. It's funny till the two Spanish speakers start fighting each other, and Kawabata loses it, screaming at them in Japanese.

All along, Kippy is translating what the three men are saying, although he doesn't speak either Spanish or Japanese. I don't want to give away the best joke of that bit, but it is meaningful, extremely well performed and very funny.

Serious trouble arrives in the person of Shane Mungitt, a poorly educated pitcher who'd been raised in various southern orphanages and foster homes. Kippy reaches out to the always quiet, always angry young man, and hears the story of Mungitt's father killing his mother, then himself, when Mungitt was 14 months old.

And when Mungitt starts helping the team win, as the closer, the press interview him, and he talks about his teammates, using a lot of offensive ethnic slang, and the word "faggot."

He is temporarily suspended. Rory Strahan-Mauk is bravely and totally in his performance as Mungitt, who is damaged goods because of his traumatic childhood and his general ignorance. "Political correctness" are two words not in his limited vocabulary. Really, an excellent, powerful performance.

Meanwhile, we are learning about Lemming, and his basic aloneness. Sure, he has a ton

of money, but his friendships are in trouble. His best off-team friend is Davey Battle (very well played by Russell E. Johnson), who before the coming out had told Lemming he needed to love someone.

Lemming is very sure of himself and his skills. Does he seem unhappy, despite his success and his money? A bit, but it's not overplayed. Jackson delivers depth in this role with incredible subtlety. He makes us understand that Lemming's stoicism is defensive; there is a key moment in Act 3 when you are well advised to watch Jackson's face as he learns what has happened because of some of his actions.

Another fabulous performance is from producer Albright, who plays Lemming's new money manager, Mason Marzac. Marzac is painfully insecure in society, but a genius at investing money. He tells Lemming he should put some of his money in a foundation, which Lemming finds a ridiculous idea.

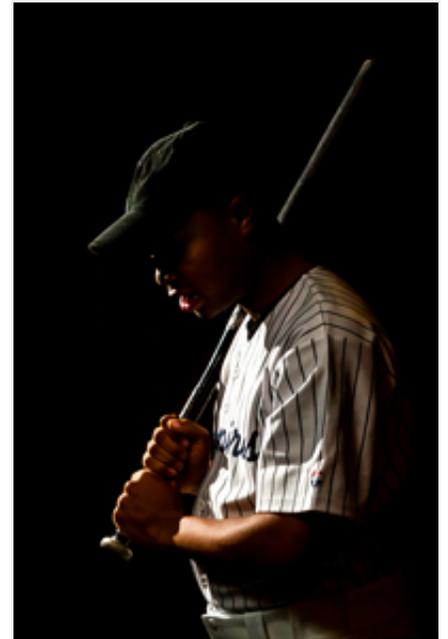
But then he agrees — a foundation, he says, to help "fucked-up kids ... fucked-up kids under 10 .. gay kids."

Marzac is freaked out about how they would be able to know if a child qualifies, which is when Lemming cracks up and says he was just goofing with him.

Lemming is increasingly disturbed by what has followed his coming out and thinks about retiring, while at the same time Marzac is for the first time getting to know, and love, baseball. Those two character arcs parallel and inform each other.

Albright delivers some powerful speeches about baseball, and his new-found love of the game.

Jon Deline is hilarious as Toddy Koovitz, Ric Forrester is sincere as Skipper, and Drew Reitz is good as Jason Chenier.



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Brandon Jackson in "Take Me Out."

Part of the richness of this script is that it understands that most baseball players really are just boys of summer, kids who are thrown off track by having to deal with a big social issue (Lemming coming out) and with the tragedies and triumphs that take place over their season.

This team of 11 actors really delivers. Very, very impressive.

Director Sonkin gets kudos for putting together such an impressive cast. I was a little annoyed by some of the blocking, but it was all pretty naturalistic, and the Dragon is kind of an odd space, with half the audience more or less at a right angle to the other half, a challenge for blocking.

Jennifer Varat's set was fine, with lockers for the fellas that are topped with benches that serve as an apartment, bleachers and a jail cell. Jeff Hamby's costumes were mostly baseball uniforms. I was thinking that the ball players weren't dressed very well for a funeral, but really ... what do most young ball players know about dressing up off field?

The lighting, by Seline G. Young, was a bit problematical, but that may have been Sonkin's call. This production uses a lot of darkness, shadow and fog, and since the Dragon does not possess a follow spot, the actor have to walk from one well-lit spot to another while delivering lines, and sometimes they got lost to the audience in the dark. A small thing.

There is almost full nudity. Technically speaking, baseball players don't shower with their jock straps on, but they do in this play. In a talk-back after the Sunday matinee, we were told that the Dragon team asked the director and cast to keep the jock straps on.

This is a great cast, well-directed, delivering a great play. Go see it. And hurry up about it. There are only four shows left, and at least one of them is already sold out.

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Dale Albright, left, and Brandon Jackson in "Take Me Out," at Dragon Theatre in Redwood City, California, July 11-20, 2014.