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'Columnist' gets off to a bumpy start

by Robert Sokol

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COURTESY JAMES KASYAN

Joseph Alsop was a polarizing figure in the Washington, D.C. press throughout the middle of the last century. Charming one minute and harshly critical the next, he was astute and oblivious, publicly married and clandestinely gay. He should be a compelling dramatic figure onstage.

As written by Pulitzer Prize-winner David Auburn (“Proof”), the seeds of a powerful play are in the period drama “The Columnist.” Unfortunately, those seeds are not sown to the fullest potential in the production that just opened at Dragon Theatre.

The company’s frequently successful wheelhouse has been tight character-driven plays and this would seem a perfect fit. Directed by Brandon Jackson, who starred in last season’s award-winning “Take Me Out,” the play feels sadly not ready for prime time.

As written, Alsop is simultaneously revered and loathed by professional colleagues. He carries himself as a larger than life figure who believes his own press. In his personal life, with his brother, wife, stepdaughter and others, he is shown with rapid bipolarity to be generous, brusque, supportive and self-absorbed.

Randy Hurst certainly has the bearing and vocal authority to vividly embody the character, and in short flights he is fascinating. Unfortunately, on opening night he was also distractingly unsure of his admittedly ample dialogue. The result was that many scenes that should have landed with a strong dramatic punch were diluted as he lost his way and struggled to get to the next point of dialogue with his co-stars.

Credit supportive co-stars Mary Price Moore and Gary Mosher for driving the momentum of the many scenes they share with Hurst. Moore affects just the right demeanor for a privileged political society wife of the 1960s. She’s also taking the fledgling steps of her personal liberation movement as she questions the balance of her surprisingly still-present need for intimacy with having married a man whose incompatible sexual orientation she knew in advance. It’s a lovely and nuanced performance.

Mosher performs well as Alsop’s more genial brother. He has grown to abhor Joe’s

increasingly pedantic rants yet his “family first” nature drives him to try to subvert an attempted extortion attempt threatening to out his brother for an affair in Moscow. Mosher and Moore also have a sweetly awkward scene of blurred boundaries and mutual need.

Casey Robbins plays Andrei, the other half of Joe’s Russian dalliance that opens the play and smartly delivers Auburn’s astute questioning of East-West relations in a compelling, disarmingly open style. Camille Brown has a fetching, winsome quality as Alsop’s hippie-leaning stepdaughter and Drew Reitz essays an earnest truth-seeking young journalist David Halberstam.

REVIEW

The Columnist

Presented by Dragon Productions Theatre Company

Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway, Redwood City

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays; closes June 21

Tickets: \$27 to \$35

Contact: (650) 493-2006, www.dragonproductions.net

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