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## Romanian romance

Dragon Theatre stages little-known 1940s play

by Karla Kane / Palo Alto Weekly

There's romance inherent in train travel. It's in the wistful sound of the whistle, the flickering lights of the windows rushing by, the sense of mystery and the idea that, in the liminal phase between starting point and destination, anything is possible.

The train is a natural vehicle for the mysterious love story presented in "The Star Without a Name," the 1942 Romanian play by Mihail Sebastian, lovingly translated for Redwood City's Dragon Theatre by Ana-Catrina Buchser, who also directs.

In a provincial mountain town, the railway station serves as a gathering point for the villagers, presided over by the garrulous stationmaster (Tyler Della). So sleepy is the town that he isn't bothered by the lack of working clocks and instead keeps time by the arrivals of trains and regular visitors. High schoolers flock to the station to catch a glimpse of the wider world, including the trains coming and going from more glamorous locales, while their prudish teacher Miss Cuckoo (Chrissy Brooks) hovers there to thwart them. Meanwhile, the school's pensive young astronomy professor (Myles Rowland) eagerly awaits the arrival of an antique science text he's spent years saving up to buy. Compared to his modest lifestyle -- a home without electricity, running water or new clothes -- the book's price is astronomical (pun intended), and its purchase causes considerable gossip amongst his friends and colleagues.

The professor is intending to hole up with his new treasure when a gorgeous redhead (Marjorie Hazeltine), dressed and bejeweled to the nines, is forcefully removed from an express train for lack of a ticket, money or indeed any identification whatsoever. She refuses to tell her name or her circumstances and, when not allowed to continue her journey, threatens to throw herself under the next train. Since none are due for hours, the professor, quickly besotted with the elegant stranger, convinces her to take shelter at his home instead, with the promise of money for a ticket once he collects his school paycheck in the morning.

The woman (identified in the program as "The Unknown") is initially hostile to the bookish professor and his humble existence, but she soon grows intrigued by his quiet village life (he's afraid of her scandalizing the neighbors by opening his window on a weeknight) and his obvious passion for science. She toys with and teases him but eventually opens up, revealing her dissatisfaction with her empty upper-class life. Soon, romance is blossoming by moonlight, and they share a magical evening stargazing and smooching.



In Dragon Theatre's production of "The Star Without a Name," Marjorie Hazeltine plays a glamorous and mysterious visitor; Myles Rowland plays the professor besotted with her. Photo by Bobby Buchser.



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But can two people from such different worlds really find sustaining happiness, or is this nameless woman just a shooting star briefly illuminating the night?

The intimate Dragon Theatre lends itself well to the small-scale story, and the designers and technical staff make effective use of simple sound and lighting effects -- those aforementioned flickering train windows and whistles as well as a lovely projection of the big dipper in the heavens.

As for the play itself, it's a gentle, sweet tale but, at least in this production, also a somewhat dull one. Perhaps something about "The Star Without a Name" was lost in Buchser's translation that might otherwise have allowed the play to resonate more deeply with viewers. Much of the play's humor centers around the "scandal" of the professor hosting a female guest in his home -- a scenario contemporary audiences have to stretch to imagine -- and both the script and the delivery are characterized by starchy mannerisms rather than the more naturalistic method acting of the modern stage.

The town setting is alternately repellent and appealing, which may be the point. The mystery woman is able to see both the up and downsides to provincial life there.

Hazeltine's character, supposedly entrancing, is actually quite irritating much of the time. Though we learn a bit more about her, and Hazeltine does a good job with the material given, it's not enough to understand why she's so hysterical and belligerent at the play's start. Rowland's professor is a likeable oddball and Brooks chews up the scenery as Miss Cuckoo (sometimes funny, often just grating), while Tom Bleeker is winsome as good-natured music teacher Udrea in desperate need of an English horn.

The production is part of Dragon Theatre's 2nd Stage program, which provides space, mentorship and modest funding to emerging artists. Buchser's goal of bringing Sebastian's work to a wider American audience is exactly the kind of project 2nd Stage supports, and in this case it's a worthy one, even if the result is a bit underwhelming. The production may not fully live up to its intriguing premise, but like watching trains come and go from a small-town station, it makes for a perfectly pleasant way to spend a few hours.

**What:** Dragon Productions' "The Star Without a Name"

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

**When:** Through May 3: Thursday-Saturday, 8 p.m.; Sunday, 2 p.m. Post-show discussion with cast and crew, Sunday, April 26.

**Cost:** \$22

**Info:** Go to [dragonproductions.net](http://dragonproductions.net) or call 650-493-2006 ext 2.

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