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## Play in Santa Ana tells of closeted gay actor's plight

Theatre Out's staging creates both dark comedy and true drama

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Thursday, September 10, 2009

One of the many ironies of Douglas Carter Beane's "The Little Dog Laughed" is that although it's set against the backdrop of Hollywood, famous for its often artifice-ridden happy endings, it persistently veers back toward reality – and away from happiness – for its characters.

See Theatre Out's staging of the 2006 play and you'll quickly come to appreciate Beane's considerable facility with dialogue and his skill for mixing dark comedy with the most starkly realistic drama, often in the same scene.

The key players are Mitchell Green, a young movie actor whose star is on the rise in Hollywood; Diane, his high-powered agent; Alex, a "rent boy" Mitchell becomes romantically involved with; and Alex's girlfriend Ellen.

We first see Mitchell in a New York hotel room, where he has drunkenly made arrangements for a male prostitute to visit him.

What transpires after his "rent boy" arrives is anything but predictable. Not only do the two men not have sex; rent boy Alex rationalizes that because he has a girlfriend and sleeps with both women and men, he can't possibly be gay.

Soon enough, though, the two men begin to develop genuine feelings for one another, which proves to be the fly in the ointment for Diane. She has big plans for her client and no intention of letting the rest of the world know he's gay.

Diane's dream for client Mitchell is the kind of "happy ending" that only happens in the movies. Ironically, she's a brutally blunt, shallow, heartless mercenary whose total lack of any human emotion is both horrifying and funny – but funny in a sick way.

In Dennis Beasley's well-paced staging, some of the most biting moments come courtesy of Nicole Erb, whose Diane betrays her virulent hatred of gays with every scathing epithet she can think of. Equally laugh-inducing is Diane's habit of biting the Hollywood hand that feeds her, including a hilariously bitter diatribe aimed at movie-industry hypocrisy.

Beane gives us an acerbic look at a deliciously bitchy world that's foreign to most of us – the world of show-biz insiders. On the other hand, his characters say things we'd expect to hear in real life rather than from fictional characters.

The real subject of "The Little Dog Laughed," though, is loneliness. Beane's script depicts a zero-sum game in which the fulfillment of each character's dreams or wishes comes at the expense of someone else's. Every time someone's heart veers toward happiness, reality intrudes and steers them away from it.

Beasley's staging reveals the script's depiction of how brutal laughs emerge when people either open up their hearts or deliberately keep them closed. Beasley takes care to keep David Hudson's Mitchell and Ryan Imhoff's Alex separated by wide amounts of space, allowing them to be physically close for just a few seconds at a time. The way an eleventh-hour curveball in the plot is handled is as skillful as the twist is surprising.

If Diane is the play's most perversely fascinating character (to us, that is), then Alex is its most intriguing: A rent boy with a steady girlfriend; a man who sleeps with both genders; a man who never drinks and has high moral standards regarding his "job."

Hudson and Imhoff skillfully capture dialogue and body language that's often tentative and awkward, showing that this is uncharted territory for both Mitchell and Alex. Hudson, who has the looks of a young leading man, shows Mitchell's selfishly non-committal stance, while Imhoff's more rugged-looking Alex is surprisingly candid.

As Diane, Erb is suitably snotty, her portrayal a portrait in cold, hard bravado. She showcases Diane's repulsion toward all things gay, her bottled-up rage, her pushy cynicism and her love of verbally cutting others down to size.

Alternating with Beth Gardiner in the role of Ellen, Alison Plott sketches out a character who like boyfriend Alex, his new love Mitchell and even Diane (to some degree) is always left feeling completely alone. Plott shows that Ellen is willing to carry a torch for Alex even though she realizes she's asking for heartache.

The slight nudity (Hudson and Imhoff wearing only speedos) is tastefully handled and shouldn't deter potential viewers. Anyone who enjoys honest human drama will look past the exposed skin and quickly realize what this "Little Dog" is really about.