

# “Selling Love” Sells Laughs, Soap at the Elite Theatre

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L-R: Lindsey Newell (Sheila), Travis Winterstein (Kelly), Cecil Sutton (Mr. Mac Ryan), Nathan Paul (Roberts), Allison Chase Williams (Laurie). Photo by Cameron Crouch

REVIEW BY CARY GINELL

If I didn't know better, I would have sworn that “Selling Love,” Logan Rica Smith's new comedy, which is currently playing at the Elite Theatre Company in Oxnard, was the pilot for a television sitcom. Now before you get all huffy and attack me for denigrating this new entry into the “thee-uh-tuh,” let me explain, because this is a good thing.

One of the hardest things to do in the entertainment world is write a sitcom. Situation comedies, like a good garden, require care, feeding, and devotion, something most television networks don't have the patience to cultivate. The best sitcoms start slowly, but eventually become popular when the audience gets to know its characters (“The Dick Van Dyke Show” was famous canceled after its first season, but intelligent minds prevailed.)

For every successful situation comedy, there was a promising pilot, and “Selling Love” is exactly what television needs now. The best TV sitcoms are character-driven, with whatever jokes coming naturally through its characters’ personalities. The great thing about “Selling Love” is that it doesn’t waste any time establishing its well-drawn-out cast of goofballs. The story centers around the sales staff of the Right Bright Soap Company, which markets industrial cleaning products to hotels and other businesses. There is nothing extraordinary about the product other than manager Mac Ryan’s passionate devotion to it. Mac is the company’s guiding light, whose blind passion for soap products often gets him in trouble, as when he mistakes a harmless copy machine repairman (Roger Krevenas) for a corporate hatchet man, ostensibly determined to decimate the ranks within the company. When Mac gets dismissed by no-nonsense Ms. Youngman (Sindy McKay), the actual hatchet “man,” this sets off a riotous competition amongst his employees, who all vie for Mac’s vacated position.

There is really nothing in the story that you haven’t seen on such similar workplace TV sitcoms like “WKRP in Cincinnati” and “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” which focused on small-time operations yearning to become bigger players. During the course of these shows, story lines such as this were commonplace, where an obligatory outsider enters to disrupt the stasis of the situation, only for everything to be neatly resolved in the end. The brilliance of “Selling Love” is that Smith doesn’t rely on jokes to communicate the humor, but the actions of the lovable characters she has created, whose personalities are established concisely in the course of the first act.

The sales department consists of stable, solid Roberts, his flirty, ambitious rival, Sheila, and new hire Laurie, who only got the job because Right Bright was the only company out of a hundred that would interview her. Add to this Mac’s eager, agreeable yes-man, Kelly, and you have a quintet of flawed characters that carries the show with equally attractive personalities.

The cast is universally excellent. As Mac, lanky, craggy Cecil Sutton has his best moments when he is elucidating his passion for soap, in monologs that turn into feverish evangelical sermons. As Kelly, Travis

Winterstein evokes “30 Rock’s” toothy Kenneth, whose ever-present grin fades when Mac vacates the scene, leaving him looking like a forlorn, lost puppy. Lindsey Newell is as bubbly as the product she is shilling, with an innocent sexiness that nobody seems to take seriously. If the show were developed as a sitcom, it would appear that Roberts, well played by Nathan Paul, would be the hub of sanity off of which his wacky co-workers revolve around. (There always has to be a stable character in this sort of show – witness Barney in “Barney Miller,” Alex in “Taxi,” and Andy in “WKRP.” Paul serves this role perfectly.) As Laurie, Allison Chase Williams goes through the most growth during the course of the play, beginning as a mousy, ineffective newby and then discovering her real self, as well as a potential love interest for Roberts. Williams accomplishes this transition beautifully and is the character with the most depth by play’s end.

The “romance” promised in the show’s ads is a misnomer. Any sense of a romantic relationship becomes evident only at the end of the play – the actual romance is implied to be in the future, as Laurie and Roberts’ attraction to each other is only beginning by the final curtain. What is best about “Selling Love” is the smartly written script and neatly defined characters. The “Love” they are selling is really Mac’s passion for his company. By show’s end, we are sorry to say goodbye to these characters and hope to see more of their escapades in the future. Let’s hope there is a rinse-and-repeat cycle for the employees at Right Bright.

“Selling Love” is directed by Andrew James. The attractive office set design is by Roger Krevenas. Give extra credit points to producers Akira Dann and Allison Williams for coming up with a variety of recordings of “I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles” (I recognized versions by Dean Martin and Chet Atkins) which bookend the acts.

“Selling Love” plays through September 29 at the Elite Theatre Company in Oxnard. For dates and show times, see the VC On Stage Calendar of Events.