

Cottage Tickled *Pink*

That's entertainment, community style

This Cottage Theatre production brings everyone's favorite pink feline to the stage with quick set changes and hilarity all around.

However, what strikes me most about the *The Pink Panther Strikes Again* is not what occurs onstage but what happens in the audience. In Howard Hummel's director's note, he begins by saying, "a true community theater is a place for all people interested in the arts to come together to work, perform, socialize, make new friends and, at the same time, create a special moment for an audience." His version of *The Pink Panther Strikes Again* does just that.

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Characters come to the stage with funny accents and absurd costumes. They chase each other and fight in goofily choreographed slapstick comedy — and the audience loves it. The people behind me laugh not only because what occurs onstage is funny but also because they see their family and friends in ways they would never otherwise see them. That's obvious when gasping chuckles come from the women two rows back before a joke is even underway.

Part of the magic onstage is a result of the same community fervor. Is this the most spectacularly acted show on the planet? No. Is this the most expensively produced Broadway spectacle? Obviously not. Is this a stage filled with actors enjoying themselves? Absolutely. What makes this show so much fun is that the actors are having a blast; they're fully invested in their characters, hamming it up in front of sets that are equally silly.

For instance, Chief Inspector Clouseau (Earl Ruttencutter) strolls into a room full of henchmen, each one dressed in the stereotypical villain garb. The unsuspecting Clouseau assumes this

is a typical dining occasion though the table is clearly labeled for "assassins." He begins to dance with his less than friendly fellows. Before you know it, one assassin has shot another, one has swallowed a poisoned dart and yet another has stabbed herself. Clouseau assumes they are drunk and walks away unscathed. This scene encapsulates the live action cartoon that is *The*

Pink Panther Strikes Again — ridiculous and packed with physical comedy.

Ruttencutter's awkward French accent is perfect for the part of Clouseau, making jokes about his mispronunciations even funnier. The haphazard Clouseau has driven his former coworker mad and created the chief evildoer: Dreyfus (Jim Curtiss). Curtiss, also the assistant director, is an audience favorite. His facial twitches and brutish chuckles paint a caricature audiences will associate with Snidely Whiplash or any other animated foul foe.

Other memorable characters include Jarvis (Bob Martindale), Fassbender (David Work) and Olga (Charlotte

Gallagher). Martindale has an unusual musical number and a voice to sing it; he almost sounds dubbed. Work plays the straight role and does it well as the genius behind the "doomsday device" he's forced to employ. Gallagher brings a cute conflicted nature that Olga must have as she battles her love for Clouseau with her duty as an assassin.

The cast is quite large with more than 40 characters, so actors double up to fill the roles. The show also replaces typical stagehands in black with pink panthers that come out for set changes. They often hold backdrops in place for the many short scenes. The culmination of the set comes in Fassbender's "doomsday device," an approximately 9-foot, decorated pyramid completed by ... well, you should see it for yourself.

Cottage Theatre has done what a community theater should — brought that community together. Children throughout the audience giggle as characters smack their heads on tables. Some give the show a standing ovation. *The Pink Panther Strikes Again* is definitely worth the watch. Again, this is not the greatest acting feat, but it's not supposed to be. Come to see a cartoon. Come to see actors enjoy themselves. Come to see why the theater is so much fun. **EW**

The Pink Panther Strikes Again runs through Feb. 16. Tix available at www.cottagetheatre.org or 942-8001.



Clouseau (Earl Ruttencutter) and Olga (Charlotte Gallagher)

Lawyers, Loggers and the Love of Money

Buying Time with heart at LCC

A once cutting-edge nationally renowned environmental law firm has become the stooge of big business, leaving its members in Armani suits and BMWs, pondering how it happened.

That's *Buying Time*, currently playing at LCC. Funny, painful, frustrating, this play feels real. That is no coincidence; the events and characters are based on a real-life drama that unfolded for an Arizona law firm in 1994. Inspiration for the play came when playwright Michael Weller was eavesdropping on a phone conversation his wife was having with the wife of a lawyer at the firm. Curiosity piqued, he spent a few months hanging out at the firm where an amazing story and memorable characters literally fell into his lap, including a twist ending any writer would be hard pressed to make up.

There are characters of extraordinary depth and complexity. Bennett Traube, skillfully executed by Parsa Naderi, takes his hero's journey in fits and starts. Traube is real, a bewildered man: passionate, overworked, adrift from his dreams, estranged from his family and unsure of how to act. His wife Jobeth (Michelle Nordella) shares the frustration of any highly capable woman who has become dependent on her husband for security and status. Corporate lawyer Del Gregorian (A.J. Klein) is a man so beaten down he willingly sides with money, for love and idealism have failed him.

And then there are the larger than life characters: a Thucydides-referencing,

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string-tie-wearing mining baron; a moneyed idealist with a wicked wit and nothing to lose; and a stage full of cocky, foul-mouthed super-lawyers. They balance the moral weight of the show and draw in the audience with humor while the playwright hits

you upside the head with detailed information on how, exactly, our world is headed to hell in a handbasket.

The play is not as tightly crafted as some of Weller's more famous works, such as *Moon Children* or *Loose Ends*. Particularly difficult to accept is the relationship between Traube and the sexy, young, headstrong environmental lawyer Christine Martel (Charlene Westbrook.) It seems a cheap way to advance a plot that rolls along just fine on its own. Yet what makes this play so wonderful is the real, imperfect people and story. If the story is muddled by an unnecessary affair, so can life be as well.

If the stereotype of a hot/idealistic lawyer gets on your nerves, you will quickly

forgive the author when talented Tara Wilbrew enters, playing Margot Buonovecchio (a character based on Janet Napolitano, current governor of Arizona and the first female attorney general of Arizona.) Smart, insightful, committed to the better angels of our hero's nature, her character plays like a really funny Horatio (were he a closet smoker).

The leadership of director Chris Pinto is evident in the way the cast works together. Pinto chose not to import a few heavy-hitting professionals but to cast almost entirely student and amateur actors (with the exception of LCC theater prof Patrick Torelle, adorable as firm leader Abe Einhorn). With young actors and larger than life characters, one expects a certain amount of ham, yet Pinto

keeps his group focused with actors balancing one another rather than striving for attention. Multiple scene changes make the play a challenge and threaten to slow the action but are handled efficiently and creatively.

Don't go to this play expecting perfection. There are certain limitations on any production involving young men with streaks of gray sprayed into their hair. Ability levels between actors vary. There are ill-fitting costumes and a complete non sequitur when a flamingly gay roommate puts out hors d'oeuvres for dinner at 10 at night. Go see this play because it is important and it is done with passion.

At a talk-back with the author after the show, an audience member asked playwright Weller what he thought of watching his work performed by college students rather than professionals. Weller responded, "You expect to see everybody doing a job with their whole heart, or with bullshit." With LCC, you get heart. — Anna Grace

Buying Time runs through Feb. 16 at LCC. Tix available at 463-5761.



Bennett Traube (Parsa Naderi) listens to Del Gregorian (A.J. Klein)