

## Henderson Sweetens Dark 'Honey'

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First, the title: "As Bees in Honey Drown." Something about bugs and their demise seems to allude to the contemporary cult of celebrity, that bright flame that lures and often consumes so many fame-hungry moths, or, in this case, bees that wallow in sticky honey until it traps them.

That's the heart of this dark and witty comedy about celebrity, a biting, fast-paced satire that covers familiar issues but does so with an innovative mix of farce and mystery. It was written by Douglas Beane, a playwright and one founder of the innovative and very hip Drama Dept., a fairly new Manhattan theater company that successfully chose this work as the first play it staged several years ago.

The story is about to be made into a movie, and Alexandria's Port City Playhouse is giving local audiences an opportunity to see it in a smooth production featuring a tour de force performance from a talented newcomer, Skye Henderson.

Henderson, who comes to the Northern Virginia stage via Houston, plays glamorous Alexa Vere de Vere, a hot flame but not much of a honey, it turns out. Vere de Vere attracts Evan Wyler, played by Emmanuel Skordalakis, a struggling young novelist who is seeing his shot at fame and fortune slip away after the mini-burst of publicity for his first book subsides.

Having had just a taste of success in the spotlight, Wyler craves the whole honey pot and ends up compromising his very essence as Vere de Vere promises to make him a literary star.

That might be enough material for a play right there, but Beane has added another intriguing layer that becomes a surreal mystery by the second act. It soon becomes obvious that something about the fast-talking, English-accented, name-dropping Vere de Vere is hidden from view.

She is almost too good to be true, a beautiful and wealthy woman of influence, a queen bee of sorts who takes young Wyler under her wing to remake him. Soon, she is dressing him in stylish suits and undressing him in stylish suites, even though he is gay and even though she professes that mixing business and pleasure is a bad idea.

Wyler revels in the attention, compromising his artistic integrity and even falling in love with his benefactor. But things soon begin to come apart, and an element of suspense creeps into the edgy satire.

Directed by George Loukides, the production is fast-paced and engaging, but it is totally Henderson's show. She handles her character's stream-of-consciousness chatter with startling dexterity, easily slipping from brassy to cunning to extremely vulnerable and back again, and she negotiates through several rapid changes of character and accent that dazzle the audience.

Even in romance, Henderson maintains an edge that keeps the other characters and the audience both unsettled and captivated. When Vere de Vere tearfully recounts a devastating death, the spell Henderson weaves fills the large theater, and it becomes totally quiet, no one daring to make the slightest rustle.

Costar Skordalakis handles himself well and makes an adequate transition from the naive young man we meet at the beginning of the play to the much wiser, clear-eyed veteran of the celebrity wars seen at the

end.

The supporting cast comprises six actors playing 19 roles in performances ranging from okay to uninspired to mediocre. The production would be better if they were better, but it still vibrates with the force of Henderson's masterful portrayal.