

VENTURA COUNTY STAR

Ron Rezac can do no wrong as an inept adulterer in 'Last of the Red Hot Lovers'

By Rita Moran
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Though they could easily allow their characters to lapse into caricature, Vivien Latham and Ron Rezac both give finely shaded, well-rounded performances in Neil Simon's "The Last of the Red Hot Lovers."

'The Last of the Red Hot Lovers'

The Neil Simon comedy runs through June 17 at the High Street Arts Center, 45 E. High Street, Moorpark. Performances are at 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays. Tickets are \$15 for adults, \$12 for students and seniors and \$8 for children 12 and younger. Call 529-8700 or visit <http://www.highstreetartscenter.com>.

An experienced cast is making a vintage Neil Simon comedy spring to life on the stage of Moorpark's High Street Arts Center.

"The Last of the Red Hot Lovers," Simon's take on a middle-aged man's inept attempts at adultery, somehow survives a generation after its debut with something to say about love and life. It still draws laughs at Simon's multiple one-liners, but it's his underlying understanding of human nature that makes his plays ultimate survivors.

The superior cast plays to and beyond the caricatures broad enough to drive a sitcom bus through. Two are new to county stages, although backed by appropriate résumés, and two are very familiar. Together they wring the most out of Simon's lines while keeping the pace quick and putting some delineating touches on the stereotypes.

Ron Rezac if he hasn't appeared on every county stage, it's not for lack of trying plays the leading role of Barney Cashman, owner of a fish restaurant who can't shake off the scent of the sea, among other flaws that impede his seductions. Rezac scores not only with the comic lines but also with the many bits of telling business and the establishment of essentially three characters as Barney becomes increasingly assured in his M.O. That

gradual transformation, probably a big draw for the veteran actor, is carried out through a quick wit, costume changes that begin with a snug dark suit and end in a jazzy jacket and with-it slacks, and a series of silly hairdos.

Rezac's Barney is a fuss-budget about details from beginning to end, toting in a paper bag of just-bought glasses from Bloomingdales along with a bottle of liqueur, a routine that grows more elaborate with repetition. The first potential mate craves a cigarette and isn't keen on the booze he brings, so the next time he comes equipped with cigarettes of various makes and a wider variety of drink options.

All of the assignations are to take place in his mother's apartment, between the hours of 3 and 5, or so, on the day his mother does volunteer work at the hospital. Barney struggles throughout to keep low-decibel any inappropriate noises that might rouse neighbors' suspicions, to make sure the window blinds are shut and the drapes drawn, and especially to leave no trace for his mother to detect on her return.

Into this tense setting he brings three women, one for each of the play's acts. First it's Elaine Navazio (Amy Jennings), a buxom blonde of easy virtue who's willing to give it a go, even though her patience is strained by Barney's nervous chitchat as he tries to "communicate" with his prospect.

Jennings is deft at portraying Elaine's matter-of-fact approach, and in subtly effecting a range of emotions during the back and forth. The forth is mostly on Elaine's part, the back is Barney in retreat every time he's gingerly stepped forward.

In act two, Barney tries his slightly better-honed approach on Bobbi Michelle (Dawn Meyer), a sometime actress whose mishaps race out of control as she pours them out nonstop to Barney. Her career has been beset by bomb-throwers, her personal life ranks somewhere between strange and bizarre. Things get even more exotic when she starts smoking those funny cigarettes, and gets Barney to dip into the pot, too. Meyer really runs with the scene, dancing around in her psychedelic mini dress and pink boots.

Finally, Jeanette Fisher (Vivien Latham) is the prey. The wife of one of Barney's friends, she is exceedingly morose and uptight.

Barney and Jeanette get into a very funny spat about her unwillingness to relax, sit down and relinquish her purse, in a scene that gives a whole new meaning to "clutch purse."

Very slowly, bit by bit, Barney finds out that Jeanette has been on the outs with her husband for eight months but is extremely reluctant to carry out the betrayal she initiated at a recent party when she and Barney found themselves alone.

Even with its tongue-in-cheek title, "The Last of the Red Hot Lovers" is a barrel of laughs, heightened by the skills of the cast and director George Kralemann.

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