

Deathtrap

Good theatre. Smart reviews.



Steve Hendrickson,
Cheryl Willis, Michael
Booth. Photo by
Michal Daniel

By MIRA REINBERG

From the first words he pronounces, Sidney Bruhl (**Steve Hendrickson**) delivers such clever lines in **Deathtrap** that it is somewhat curious he should be the frustrated mystery playwright that he is. And frustrated he is at the writer's block afflicting him, even if the obstruction to his creativity is alleviated by the sight of the many posters displaying the plays he had written in the past, now hanging on the walls of his room, a reminder of the inert state of his typewriter.

Bruhl feels trapped, deeply so. That is why he is “green with envy” upon reading the manuscript sent to him by his former student admirer Clifford Anderson (**Michael Booth**). The fact that a neophyte like Anderson could produce a tale of mystery so polished and intriguing drives the callous veteran to consider the most radical means of appropriating the script and dispatching it to Broadway in order to reap the benefits of its assured success. Bruhl's wife, Myra (**Cheryl Willis**), is the abiding spouse who beseeches him to abandon his fatal plans and employ less lethal means of persuasion; collaboration, for example.

For those who have not seen **Ira Levin's** 1978 play (or its 1982 cin-

ematic production) this is enough told. **Bain Boehlke** has directed the play with more than a touch of **Jungle Theater's** penchant for the madcap proceedings characterizing the human comedy. And then indeed the comical, almost stretched-to-absurdity turn of events are the essence of the play itself. The twists and counter-twists include the nutty prognostications of a farcical Dutch clairvoyant (**Claudia Wilkins**) who is the couple's neighbor, and advice from Bruhl's rather prosaic lawyer, Porter Milgrim (**Terry Hempleman**).

The script is meant to achieve two things at once: be suspenseful and surprising (shocking would be a bit strong) as a good thriller should, and funny. In this production the entertaining quality had the upper hand, and fortunately so. Although the piece has the clear structure of a play within a play, what comes through the unexpected twists in the plot is less an attempt to study the affinities between reality and fiction and more a demonstration of the unreliable and corruptible relation between the things that drive us to commit a crime: greed, frustration, romantic love. We cannot even count on these motives to be consistent.

This theme necessitates much proof and for this particular play, written as a black comedy, to succeed in expressing some of these intricacies it would hinge on the subtlety of the actors' performance. Hendrickson is wry and merciless as Bruhl and convinces us that we cannot always sublimate our urges through art. The display of weapons, some of which were used in his own plays – guns, handcuffs, axe, dagger, crossbow, spears and more – is tes-

tament to this. He can also show fragility when circumstances lead him there. Booth's Anderson competently changes from complacent to cunning and Wilkens deals out Helga's rowdy prophecies quite wittily.

It is ironic – or perhaps not – that the most impressive portrayal of the proper depth of reaction the plot should generate is delivered by the wonderful Cheryl Willis. Myra, the dutiful wife, externalizes her feelings in a hysterical and thus hilarious way. But she is the one who tells Bruhl that the plans he entertains make him alien to her, and in that she reminds us that we are no longer predictable when we perceive ourselves as trapped.

Deathtrap, by Ira Levin. Directed and set design by Bain Boehlke. At Jungle Theater, 2951 Lyndale Avenue South, Minneapolis, Minnesota. March 29 – May 19, 2013. Tickets at Box Office Phone: (612) 822-7063 or Box Office Email: boxoffice@jungletheater.com

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