

Theater review: 'Deathtrap' shows murder can be a funny thing



Michael Booth as Clifford Anderson and Steve Hendrickson as Sidney Bruhl in "Deathtrap" by Ira Levin.

Poor Sidney Bruhl. His juicy murder mysteries were once the hottest thing on Broadway. But four flops over 18 years have left this aging playwright cynical, whiny and so desperate that he'd kill for a really good script. Hmmm. Kill for a script? There's an idea.

And with that premise, the flywheel of Ira Levin's "Deathtrap" kicks into gear and we take off on a ride with more twists than a

mountain road. Don't look for depth, poignancy or the greater struggle of humankind here. As you leave the theater, you will feel only that you have been entertained — teased by a playwright's shamelessly concocted thriller.

Director Bain Boehlke matches Levin's sense of comic spoofery in a production that opened Friday at the Jungle Theater in Minneapolis. Boehlke balances natural suspense — played for real — with the tongue-in-cheek caprice that is the script's lifeblood.

In his self-pity at the show's top, Sidney reads a play that has been sent to him by a former student. He proclaims it to be so good that “a gifted director couldn't even hurt it.” So he invites the young playwright, Clifford Anderson, over to his elegant carriage house for an evening's conversation. Sitting in is Sidney's wife, Myra.

And that's really about all I should tell you without curdling the plot. Suffice to say that the play flows out of Sidney's conniving imagination and that Levin's dialogue is a play within a play, Sidney and Clifford writing a script that devours previous action and spits it out as new dialogue — to be chewed over again.

Steve Hendrickson plays Sidney with such amoral glee, such glib villainy that it is impossible not to root for him secretly. He's a cad, but he's a lovable cad.

“I don't know why I lie,” he says insouciantly. “I'm a liar.”

Boehlke's set is typically fine. The carriage house — with brick fireplace, plank floors, french doors — has a raffish comfort. Lightning strikes and thriller-chiller moments give lighting designer Barry Browning a chance to turn up the amperage. And how about a hand for John Novak, who has dressed the set with axes, daggers, guns, swords, handcuffs and other props — souvenirs from Sidney's previous stage triumphs?

Michael Booth displays the youthful optimism and cold ambition that animate Clifford's calculations in his power game with Sidney. Cheryl Willis presents Myra as the friendly nudnik she is — dithering just a bit with her sensitive heart.

For pure chuckles, there is the psychic Helga ten Dorp (Claudia Wilkens), who appears to have wandered in from Neil Simon's notebook, and a nebbish of a lawyer (Terry Hempleman) who oils the plot.

Thrills and chills? Laughs and snickers? "Deathtrap" has them.

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