

'Tyrone & Ralph' a scorching test of wills

A backstage drama takes a rich look at the dynamic tension that resulted in the original Guthrie Theater.

In "Tyrone & Ralph," the dramatic tension takes both literal and figurative dimension. First, how would the fractious relationship between Tyrone Guthrie and Ralph Rapson affect the concrete and steel of the original Guthrie Theater? Secondly, how does architecture serve or detract from the ethereal needs of theater?



Jeffrey Hatcher's new play opened Saturday in a winning production at the History Theatre in St. Paul.

Rapson headed the University of Minnesota's architecture school when a steering committee tapped him for the project in the early 1960s. Guthrie was a celebrated director with storied associations reaching back decades. He had a vision, to get theater out of New York. Building on the success of his Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Ontario, Guthrie selected the Twin Cities from among several suitors.

Hatcher's sure-footed wit and command of dialogue contributes to an entertainment stuffed with rich lectures on theater, criticism and design -- a backstage drama offering glimpses into Guthrie's mind. The thrust stage, he avers, "makes us work harder," a necessary element of production. A stage must be deep enough for an actor to walk forth and recite the



opening soliloquy of "Richard III." The "best" productions are not necessarily the most "exciting."

In the eloquent delivery and stature of actor Steve Hendrickson, Guthrie's words are a feast of ideas. He relates floating his notion of a regional theater with Brooks Atkinson and fawning on the famed critic's obvious suggestions. Atkinson says he'll write about the project in his column, and Hendrickson's Guthrie dryly notes, "That's how you place an ad in the New York Times."

Hatcher's script is linear only in the sense that he starts with Guthrie and Rapson's first meeting and moves inevitably to the night when the theater opens. It is the journey that matters most, and both men scorch each other in a test of wills.

Hendrickson and Mark Benninghofen, who plays Rapson, bristle with energy. Ron Peluso's staging is broadly populist, with projected images on screens that

show photos and early sketches on what might have been. Hendrickson gives Guthrie a bigger-than-life splash -- bombastic, egocentric, erudite, while flirting with the boundaries of slapstick. Benninghofen is rock solid as Rapson, a practical man with his own ego, his own sense of determination, but also a degree of frustrated inferiority.

As Guthrie comments, when a critic says "There is a lot of good stuff there," it is usually code for "It doesn't work." This good stuff does work, even if Hatcher steers toward a conclusion with some obvious foreshadowing and Peluso uses a little hocus-pocus to show Rapson as mad scientist, sketching the final designs as thunder and lightning crack overhead.

That's a quibble. "Tyrone & Ralph" is what the History Theatre does best: an entertaining glance at seminal events that defined Minnesota. The product of Guthrie and Rapson was that.