

Perfect Arrangement by *Topher Payne* Directed by *Amy Berlin* Making America Gay Again

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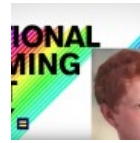
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FRED KAUFMAN
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Topher Payne's *Perfect Arrangement* is an important, imperfect play.

Richmond Triangle Players' production of the play is an important, imperfect event.

Watching the kitschy opening scene, which is set at the beginning of the McCarthy era, makes you feel like you're watching a very broad 1950's sitcom ala *I Love Lucy*. The men

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How often do you hide your sexuality?

- Never - I'm out and everyone knows
- When I'm at work or school - I'm not out there
- When I'm with family - I'm not out to them
- When I'm with work and family, but I'm out to my friends
- I'm still in the closet and not out at all

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tell slightly off color jokes, while the women flirt about in their fabulous 50s frocks, chirping about love and housekeeping.

Bob Martindale (Stevie Rice) and his wife, Millie (Louise Ricks), are the hosts; their guests are Bob's boss (Jeff Clevenger) and his dotty wife, Kitty (Jacqueline O'Connor). Bob's secretary, Norma (Tara Callahan Carroll), is also there, along with her chipper husband, Jim (Luke Newsome).

As directed by Amy Berlin, the scene is so ramped up with artificiality as to be off putting. Everyone is supra acting. There is no sense at all about who these people are. They look familiar. We have watched enough *Mad Men* to recognize the costumes and the era. There's just no attempt to let the audience in at what the artifice is all about.

After the older couple leave, the "masque" of the previous scene is torn off and expositional dialogue fills in the blanks. Turns out this is no *I Love Lucy*. Maybe *Ethel Loves Lucy*.

We too slowly learn that the couples are gay and are masquerading as happily married couples. The reveal comes too late to save the preceding scene. If we had a hint from the characters that they were acting or had some sort of character clues, the artificiality wouldn't be so, well, artificial.

These couples share adjoining apartments connected by a "closet," which is placed smack dab center stage, where you would expect the front door to be. Once you've recovered from that metaphor hitting you over the head, you realize that the couples are actually he-he, she-she, not two he-she's. The closet is not merely metaphor, it is the passageway to keeping their secret safe in this era of witch hunts and homosexual criminalization.

The conflict shifts to overdrive as Mr. Payne places both Bob and Norma as employees for the U.S. State Department. Bob seems to be the head of H.R. and Norma, his secretary.

Things get more complicated when Bob and Norma are given the task of rooting out homosexuals and other supposed blackmail risks. As hypocrisy, fear and guilt creep in to their lives, Payne's play acquires a heavier hand; contrivances build up, and the ending veers into righteousness.

What looked like a 1950s sitcom turns out to be a 1980s sitcom in disguise, capped with liberal messages to applaud.

The situation comedy turns quickly into overwrought disaster, a situation fairly predictable given the setup.

Although based in historical reality, this play utilizes a deus ex machina (a contrived device in a play that wraps things up neatly) that seems forced and unrealistic.

This point comes in the arbitrary character of "Barbara Grant," a fellow employee under suspicion for lewd (read slutty) behavior. Although tertiary to the plot, she will swoop in at the end (like Shakespeare uses Greek Gods) and provide resolutions for some of the cast.

The tumble into contrivance could have been deterred had Ms. Berlin injected more of that satirical eye that she is known for. A sharper pace and wit throughout might have made the contrivances palatable.

Ms. Berlin, and the production are bolstered by some very elegant production values and actresses.

This play looks nifty thanks to David Ballas' set. Complicated but clean, gorgeous in every detail. I especially liked the portrait of an older gentlemen on the wall next to the kitchen in the ladies apartment - so out of place with the flowery decor as to suggest a man with no artistic taste lives there.

Lynn West's fabulous 50s frocks were glorious. The women's outfits were all delicious. Their shoes and hats were exquisite. The men (no fashion competitor to the women) looked smart and elegant with clean, crisp lines. Joel Furtick's hair styles on the women was a delight (especially for Ms. Ricks).

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Better yet, this production features a pair of really capital performances: by Jennifer Frank, as a sexually unapologetic translator who proved that beauty and power can live in the same body, and the divine Jacqueline O'Connor, who gives Kitty's sincere air headedness a kind of magnificence. Even when the plays seems over arranged, they are damn near perfect.

Louise Ricks pushes past her baby doll façade to find some real truth and sincerity in Millie. Jeff Clevenger pushes past his comedy club yada yada to find a harder edge and real power in his second appearance in the play as Sunderson.

Stevie Rice and Luke Newsome kind of get the fuzzy end of the lollipop stick playing the husbands. Curious, since the play was written by a man, but the women dominate this script. The protagonists are all female. Ms. Berlin also seems to showcase her women giving them prominent staging and flashier clothing.

Rice seems a weak catalyst so that his descent at the end of the play seems earned. Newsome is just too happy go lucky all the time to build any friction of character.

Andrew Bonniwell's lighting has some real stellar moments, morphing as the power structure of the action shifted, but curiously left the kitchen dark every time someone swung the door to go in or out.

Dr. Jake Newsome, a scholar of American and German LGBTQ history who works at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. has written a companion article for this production speaking to its historical accuracy. He says:

"The story presented in Perfect Arrangement is not simply a chapter of "gay history." During the Lavender Scare and the subsequent decades of activism, gay Americans not only fought for specific rights, but also broadened the definition of full citizenship to include all Americans, regardless of sexual orientation. Therefore, this is fundamentally an American story. It is a moral lesson about responsible citizenship, the importance of tolerance, and the acceptance of diversity. This history has much to teach all Americans about the fragile nature of human rights and civil liberties in modern democratic life."

RTP's production is important for the LGBT community in that knowing where one came from is as important as knowing where one is.

This production of *Perfect Arrangement* is a good one with a few outstanding elements, but as history for the LGBT Community, it is a spoonful of sugar.

Perfect Arrangement runs at Richmond Triangle Players now through Oct. 22nd. [You can snag tickets here.](#)

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