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Theater review: 'Perfect Arrangement'

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JOHN MACLELLAN

In Richmond Triangle Players' production of Topher Payne's "Perfect Arrangement," nothing is quite as it seems during cocktails with the Martindales. Payne's provocative new comedy is playing through Oct. 22 at 1300 Altamont Ave. in Richmond.



'Perfect Arrangement'

Theater review

Where: Richmond Triangle Players, 1300 Altamont Ave.

When: through Oct. 22

Tickets: \$28-\$30

Details: (804) 346-8113 and www.rtriangle.org

Posted: Saturday, October 1, 2016 6:00 pm

By JULINDA LEWIS Special correspondent

One can expect that a play called "Perfect Arrangement" might barely be able to contain itself, what with the built-in pressure of irony.

But playwright Topher Payne aimed for more than mere irony, more, even, than the face-straining sitcom facades of the actors who appear to have stepped right out of a 1950s cocktail party with Lucy, Ricky, Fred and Ethel, and for good reason.

In 1950, the U.S. State Department was concerned with the suspected security risks posed by Communists (the Red Scare) and sexual deviants (the Lavender Scare). By the end of that year, more than 600 employees were dismissed from the department on charges of immorality.

For all its exaggerated humor, "Perfect Arrangement" is based on real problems, faced by real people, in the real world.

Set in a Georgetown duplex at the height of the McCarthy era, the two-act dramatic comedy focuses on the lives of two married couples, Bob and Millie Martindale (Stevie Rice and Louise Ricks) and Jim and Norma Baxter (Luke Newsome and Tara Callahan Carroll) who

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are, in actuality, two same-sex couples using their marriages of convenience as a

cover.

Compounding metaphor upon irony, a capacious closet conspicuously placed at center stage connects the two apartments, providing safety for the hidden relationships.

Once we understand the nature of the relationships — a bit of business Payne and director Amy Berlin take pains to reveal as slowly and as slyly as possible — the plot quickly thickens. Bob works for the State Department, and Norma is his secretary, and the two are assigned by Bob's superior, Theodore Sunderson (Jeff Clevenger) to root out the organization's deviants.

As if that isn't bad enough, Barbara Grant (Jennifer Frank), a State Department translator called home from an overseas assignment due to her suspected promiscuity, turns out to have had a past with Bob's wife, Millie.

The twists and turns of the plot are simultaneously hilarious and socially horrendous, leading to many comparisons with racism and the civil rights movement — institutionalized and government-sanctioned discrimination inadvertently united the disenfranchised and fueled the growth of activism.

Ricks turns in a remarkable performance, achieving a delicate and dynamic balance between Millie the doting wife and Millie the budding LGBT activist.

Her stellar opposite is embodied in Sunderson's wife, Kitty (Jacqueline O'Connor), who is so completely clueless and annoyingly ditzzy that she transcends stereotypes and achieves a whole new level of genuineness.

Neither Newsome nor Rice's character is fully developed, as the focus is primarily on the women.

Payne achieves this through the writing and dialogue, Berlin reinforces it in staging and, to top it all off, Lynn West's retro costumes for the women feature fabulous concoctions of fabric and crinoline, with hats, gloves, shoes and purses galore.

Newsome's character is a lovable and level-headed teacher, while Rice's character almost too subtly explores a deeper, internal conflict that suggests an unappealing combination of self-loathing and self-serving.

The fabric of these relationships is stretched to a point where they are unrecognizable, and certainly will not snap back to their former shape. Furthermore, neither Payne nor Berlin opted to tidily tie up loose ends, leaving the characters and the audience to ponder the deeper realities of sexual identity, politics and history.

As one viewer remarked at the end, "I've never laughed so hard at something so serious."

Julinda Lewis is a dancer, teacher and writer living in eastern Henrico County. Contact her at jdldances@yahoo.com.

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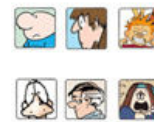
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