

I've Seen That Face Before

Familiarity breeds contentment at two summer theaters.

By Christopher Arnott

The River Rep has been presenting traditional summer stock seasons at the Ivoryton Playhouse for 19 years. The beautiful drive out to Ivoryton, the walls full of autographed photos of stars who appeared at the playhouse in its glory days, and especially those comfortable Thompson faces mean that I will happily go see anything here, even a stupid and dated Alan Ayckbourn farce about adultery.

The cast—with Warren Kelley as a doddering businessman, Owen Thompson as a philandering fiend in his employ and Jenn Thompson as the mousy wife of a newer colleague—wisely underplays the play's toilet humor and especially the wife-abuse jokes, which must have been a riot when the play was written in 1970.

The happily married Evan Thompson directs this piece, though he and his beloved Joan aren't onstage this time, saving themselves for the plum roles of the parents in Arthur Miller's war-at-home drama *All My Sons* July 13-23.

Peter Handke's *Self-Accusation* was penned a few years before Alan Ayckbourn's *How the Other Half Loves*, and also deals with delusion, self-knowledge and abusive behavior, but it emanates from another European theater

world altogether—a dark philosophical void emitting stark verbal antagonism.

Director Tea Alagic not only ignores Handke's ongoing controversiality (see sidebar), she defies his explicit instructions to play the piece on a bare stage, its two performers speaking through microphones, with house lights up throughout. Having the actors frolic inside plexiglass boxes, and against funhouse mirrors, doesn't detract from Handke's soulless rant, however.

Alagic and Cabaret artistic director Kristina Menicino take even greater liberties with the evening's companion piece, Frederike Roth's *Piano Plays*, gratuitously interspersing quotations, dance routines and the facial moles of Madonna into an already disjointed downbeat drama about materialism, justified love, true blues and the borderline between erotica and causing a commotion. Which is to say that the into-the-groove interjections are pretty valid, only distracting for those who want to appreciate this U.S. premiere on the script's own merits.

As with Ivoryton, it's the now-familiar visages of Eric Gilde (a local stage ubiquity from his Yale undergrad days), Gilbert Owuor (half of the title role in the Cabaret's last show, *Woyzeck*, now half of the title role in *Self-Accusation*), Joseph



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How the Other Half Loves (with River Rep stalwarts Owen and Jenn Thompson on the lefthand side, and Warren Kelley center).

Tapper, Kristen Connolly and the rest who are getting me fired up for the rest of the SumCab season. I love that the next offering is *Preparadise, Sorry Now*, by that brilliant, meteoric '80s burn-out Rainer Werner Fassbinder, whose own

hoary street gang of an acting ensemble fueled dozens of his stage and film projects. But at this point, I'm totally sucked in—I'd see these troupers in anything. ■

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