

Potomac Stages

October 19 - November 13, 2004

Private Eyes

Reviewed October 27
Running time 2:05 - one intermission

One of the hardest tricks in acting is to play a scene where your character is an actor playing a scene. How "real" do you make it and how "forced" should it be? (Of course, one of the hardest tricks in reviewing is to recognize where an actor playing an actor is intentionally over-playing the scene within a scene or simply is not playing the scene well.) This play provides its five member cast with multiple opportunities to stumble over that danger (and reviewers multiple chances to misinterpret what is going on) because it is a play within a play within a play, etc. Indeed, I lost count of how many layers there are as the cast of a play about the cast of a play about the cast of a play break out of one scene only to find that they are in another scene about that scene. Figuring out just what is going on is part of the fun. Watching sharp performances by two of the five member cast is also fun, and the set is a disorienting delight which nicely amplifies the confusion.

Storyline: An actress auditions for a role in a play about an actress who auditions for a role. The director turns out to be an actor playing a director when the play's director interrupts the rehearsal. Soon other layers of shows-within-shows emerge in an exploration of the nature of truth built on compounded stories of adultery and pretense.

Steven Dietz is a prolific playwright with a wide range of interests and styles. He's tackled the super-serious (racism, nuclear war, AIDS) the unusual (vampirism, marriage among rock stars) and the merely quizzical (*More Fun than Bowling*). This may be his hardest play to categorize. In it, he seems to take a perverse pleasure in lulling the audience into a belief that he has finally revealed the last layer of confusion only to spring another revelation. The repeated "gotcha" effects get to be tedious. The first interruption is a kick. The second elicits an "ah, yes" feeling. The final one of the first act is a gem. But all too many others feel contrived.

Through it all, Tiffany Fillmore is an energetic delight as she peels layer after layer from her character without seeming contrived. Christopher Poverman, who appears late in the first act, provides a solid presence and is superb at listening to the other characters. This is a skill that is just right since his part is that of a therapist skilled at listening. He even makes the line "I'm Frank. I hope you will be" sound like it actually would work as a set up to a therapy session. Elizabeth Darby manages to be smooth with a part that has her flipping from character to character. Others in the cast have difficulty with both the often overly wordy script and the task of acting the act of acting.

David Ghatan's angular set of interlocking platforms and screens captures the essence of the piece with what turn out to be multiple playing spaces, each of which can be "the real world" one moment and the setting for a scene within a scene the next. He also designed the sharp lighting plan which guides the audience between these various levels of reality or pretense. The deep space of the Church Street Theater, while lacking wing or fly space, gives a designer plenty of room on stage to work wonders. It has accommodated many intriguing designs for its resident theater company, the Stanislavsky Theatre Studio, as well as rental tenants. Ghatan takes full advantage of its scope while not seeming to have been constrained by the lack of off-stage facilities.

Written by Steven Dietz. Directed by Deborah Kirby. Design: David Ghatan (set and lights) Melanie Dale (costumes) Andy Zipf and Shawn Matthews (incidental music) Shawn Matthews (sound) Christopher O. Banks (photography) Tamisha Ottley (stage manager). Cast: Elizabeth Darby, Deryl Davis, Tiffany Fillmore, Christopher Poverman, Chad Tyler.