

The Off the Hook Chicago Free Press Review

Pitching the sale

"Buicks"

Written by Julian Sheppard

Showing: Precious Mettle Theatre

Company at Side Studio,

1520 W Jarvis, through Aug 28

Contact (773) 989-0760

Tickets:\$15

How often does this happen? A new theatre gets everything right the first time out.

Deeply depicted, this Chicago premiere of "Buicks," Julian Sheppard's intense character drama, marks the directing debut of Kevin Fox. An accomplished actor, Fox knows how to make other actors create characters so real in two hours that you feel you've known them a thousand times longer. This is auspicious all around.

The story is simple enough to go deep. Bill is a stereotypical car salesman who can sell dreams to strangers but lacks his own. His mid-life crisis is so mired in denial it's bound to erupt all the more for being repressed. It's triggered when Kathy, exhausted by a husband who can't forgive his son for being better than he is, leaves with the kids. Cut off from what little meaning he'd acquired, Bill impulsively leaves too. Seeking Kathy, he takes with him Naranja, his 22-year old Mexican receptionist, an undocumented immigrant who wants Bill to vouch for her green card. A self-declared "adventure," this road trip from Fresno to Albuquerque consumes most of the play. Various encounters open Bill up to possibilities he never weighed, like Naranja's unexpected skill at selling cars to customers by guessing their desires. Even being assaulted by a drinking buddy in Window Rock, Ariz., becomes a learning experience. When Bill and Naranja return to California, the car dealership no longer seems a dead end. They've sold themselves on a future, a bigger sale than anything the dealership ever saw.

Disarmingly straightforward, the action feeds on a powerful dramatic formula, our craving for a second chance at

life and love. Thanks to Fox, we never give up on Bill, even when he seems to have abandoned himself. David Parkes' American dreamer balances our national faults—smug selfishness, self-serving self pity and a phobia about differences—against our strengths—dogged optimism, resilience and pluck. As his rightly impatient wife, Kathy Logelin helps us measure Bill against her lost love.

As written, Naranja seems a mix of protective wariness and ecstatic bursts of hope. Liza Fernandez makes wonders from these extremes, revealing a believer to believe in. Alternately cunning and compassionate, Scott Kennedy depicts a host of significant souls, including Bill's doubting dad, his distant employees and the strangers who, by example or by elimination, offer tricky lessons.

Worthy work like "Buicks" reminds you that every play is a journey. Two hours after we take it, we can be astonished by how far we've come and gone. --Lawrence Bommer

The Sun Times Review

Hedy Weiss

Familiar themes shift into high gear in 'Buicks'

August 16, 2005

BY HEDY WEISS Theater Critic This is one of those "hidden gems discovered in a tiny theater during the dog days of summer" stories that Chicago is so good at generating.

Advertisement

The play is "Buicks." It's the work of a much-produced young New York writer, Julian Sheppard. And while it covers some familiar territory -- family man and car salesman in the throes of a serious midlife crisis -- its blend of rage and whimsy, truth and fantasy is enough to make it seem entirely fresh. Sheppard is unquestionably a playwright to watch.

The fact that "Buicks" is receiving a terrifically acted production by Precious Mettle Theatre, a small troupe that has lured four excellent actors into what is clearly a labor of love, is an added bonus. So too is the performance space where the troupe has taken up temporary residence -- the Side Studio near the tracks of the Jarvis L station in Rogers Park. This shoebox-size theater invariably brings out the best in those who work there.

The salesman Sheppard puts in the hot seat here is Bill (David Parkes), a man who has inherited a Buick showroom in Fresno, Calif., from his highly competitive, judgmental father, Gerald (Scott Kennedy in one of six roles), an old man now in a nursing home. Bill is married to Kathy (Kathy Logelin), a smart, passionate, very adult woman who tries desperately to communicate with her husband but increasingly feels shut out.

The couple, who married straight out of college, have two teenage kids on the right track in life. Yet Bill seems threatened by the competence and maturity of his own son. And this sense of suppressed rage -- and diminished possibility -- is powerfully encapsulated in a scene that finds him alone, pounding his fists on the dining room table with truly frightening ferocity.

THEATER REVIEW

'BUICKS'

RECOMMENDED

When: Through Aug. 28

Where: Precious Mettle Theatre at the Side Studio, 1520 W. Jarvis

Tickets: \$15

Call: (773) 989-0760

Working as a receptionist at Bill's showroom for the past year has been a sweet, pretty, ambitious and competent receptionist in her early 20s. Her name is Naranja (Liza Fernandez), and she is an undocumented Mexican about whom Bill has taken the "don't ask, don't tell" approach. Now, Naranja wants her boss to be her sponsor so that she can get a green card. She desperately wants to be able to live a normal life.

Her request comes just as Kathy is about to walk out on Bill, taking the kids with her. Angry, terrified and broken, Bill decides to make Naranja an offer she can't refuse. They embark on an "adventure" -- a car trip from Fresno to Albuquerque, N.M., where his in-laws live. And though there is a sense of danger and volatility in the air, Naranja, who is not quite as naive as she might seem, takes the challenge.

Parkes (who has starred in most of TimeLine Theatre's recent productions) is a sensational actor, and he's got this character in his bones. But he is a known quantity by now.

The revelation here is Fernandez, a girlish beauty with an inner glow. A transplant from New York making her Chicago debut, Fernandez radiates an enormous natural charm and energy that can surprisingly shift into a more sensual and experienced aura. And her big monologue -- a sales routine that suggests that the next generation of David Mamet's salesmen may just come in the guise of optimistic young female immigrants -- is alone worth the price of admission.

Logelin's portrait of a wife who has lost contact with her husband is exquisitely limned. And Kennedy's multiple morphs -- from insecure customer to aging patriarch, from goofy loser to barroom thug -- could not be more skillful.

Applause for director Kevin Fox, who has the four actors working at the top of their game. And for set designer Brian Sydney Bembridge, whose starburst linoleum-covered floor and walls, along with a 1950s-style metal office desk that shifts from suburban dinner table to motel bed to front porch, once again proves that less can be more.

The New City Review

STAGE

[Click for stage events](#)

Tip of the Week

Buicks

Fabrizio O. Almeida

Do certain professions, like politician and lawyer, adhere themselves to moral bankruptcy? Before you answer, playwright Julian Sheppard would like to add car salesman to the list. In the opening scene to "Buicks," the engrossing new drama from Precious Mettle Theatre, the cynical character of Bill Eberline--a worthy theatrical cousin to Mamet's testosterone-fueled salesmen of "Glengarry Glen Ross"--preys upon his car-buying clientele's insecurities in order to "close the deal," all the while painfully aware of his own neuroses that have made him a lousy father, husband and son. But the scene, both brutal and funny in its honesty, is just a starting point for a play that over the next two hours will detour into several more psychologically and verbally rich explorations. Actor David Parkes is utterly compelling as the alpha male relegated to beta status once his wife and kids abandon him, as is Liza Fernandez as Naranja, his Mexican receptionist who unwittingly breaks through his forced machismo on their cross-country jaunt to find Bill's family. Ultimately, whichever ride you allow "Buicks" to take you on--Bill's psychological journey to reclaim an identity or Naranja's emotional one to find one--the final destination will be a deeply satisfying conclusion to a stirring night of theater.

"Buicks" plays at The Side Studio, 1520 West Jarvis, (773)989-0760, through Aug 28. (2005-08-09)

The Flavor Pill.com Review

<http://chi.flavorpill.net/mailler/issue48/index.html>

Buicks

 SEND  PRINT  TEXT MSG  CONTEST

when: Now through Sun 8.28 (Thur-Sat: 8pm / Sun: 7pm)

where: The Side Studio (1520 W Jarvis Ave, 773.989.0760) [map](#)

price: \$15

links: [Event Info](#)

In the opening lines of the Precious Mettle Theatre Company's impressive inaugural production of *Buicks*, Bill (David Parkes), the car dealership owner/protagonist, tells his milquetoast client, "You're a **Buick** — and I don't want you to take that the wrong way." Solidly "middle" cars — middle of the road, middlebrow, middle-aged, and middle-class — Buicks symbolize a specifically American, khaki-clad averageness that Bill loses forever when his wife and children leave him. He subsequently kidnaps his Green Card-seeking Mexican secretary to accompany him on a road trip to find them and, accidentally, himself. The cast's subtle, searing performances and Julian Sheppard's remarkable script rise above the story's paean to commonness, as well as the claustrophobic confines of the sedan-sized Side Studio Theater. (AF)

The Windy City Times Review

<http://www.wctimes.com/gay/lesbian/news/ARTICLE.php?AID=9263>

Buicks

Playwright: Julian Sheppard

At: Precious Mettle Theatre at the Side Studio, 1520 W. Jarvis Ave.

Phone: (773) 989-0760; \$15

Runs through: Aug. 28

BY MARY SHEN BARNIDGE

Bill Aberdeen, the hero of Julian Sheppard's play, sells Buicks in Fresno, Calif. Rather, he sells Buick's image of a man satisfied with his life. A man who has put away his Porsche and Lamborghini fancies to content himself with the family he loves. Bill thinks he is just such a man, but one day, his wife, fed up with his denial, takes the children and leaves him. And so he sets out, in a Buick Rendezvous, dragging along his bewildered secretary, to fetch his rebellious spouse home from Albuquerque.

Ho-hum, another Midlife Crisis/Road Trip play, you may be thinking. But Sheppard is not just another aging Huckleberry Finn charging admission for his own runaway-adventure fantasy. Sure, Bill's odyssey includes the traditional scenarios: he is counseled by an enigmatic, marshmallow-noshing desert guru. He drinks with a fellow outlaw (who robs and abandons him) . He sleeps with an exotic beauty (who takes pity on him) . But finally, our Quixote is forced to conclude, "I'm a loser! I'm an asshole!" "No, you're not," replies his wise Sancha, "You're a good man who's TRYING to be an asshole."

She's right. And Bill's climb back up from the depths of his dissatisfaction cannot be hurried if WE are to be satisfied with his redemption. But never in this deftly crafted production are we bored by its restrictive dramatic universe or, for that matter, its likewise restrictive physical dimensions in the Side Studio. Director Kevin Fox and a cast led by David Parkes as the clueless Bill, with Liza Fernandez as his practical-minded sidekick, Kathy Logelin as his beleaguered wife and Scott Kennedy as a variety of strangers, steep their potentially soapy personae in compassion and intelligence to create an intimate empathy for humble citizens seeking happiness in a world of increasingly grandiose expectations.

The personnel of the Precious Mettle Theatre, making its debut with this Chicago premiere production, have appeared elsewhere on the storefront circuit, and will probably appear again, in plays far more shallow than this one. But nowhere will we see the investment of loving attention that we do in this coming-of-middle-age parable.

<http://www.wctimes.com/gay/lesbian/news/ARTICLE.php?AID=9265>

Windy City Times

Critics' Picks

2005-08-24

Buicks, Precious Mettle Productions at the Side Studio, through Aug. 28. You have one more weekend to take an ironic-humored, but ultimately warm-hearted, road trip with a quartet of actors reveling in their material. The room is small, so don't dawdle. MSB

Chicago Tribune


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forecast


Human nature is stronger
than mother nature.

ON THE FRINGE: NEW REVIEWS OF CHICAGO'S DIVERSE THEATER SCENE

By Nina Metz

Special to the Tribune

Published August 26, 2005

Julian Sheppard's "Buicks" could just as easily be called "Death of a Car Salesman," or better yet, "The Rebirth of Average." Bill (David Parkes) owns a Buick dealership in Fresno, Calif., and he's drowning in boredom and self-delusion. In a wardrobe by JCPenney and a mustache that announces, "I'm a loser," his average facade belies a profound discontent.

After a tense dinner with the wife, the fault lines of their marriage as raw as anything Edward Albee could conjure, she up and takes the kids, fleeing to parts unknown. What's an average guy to do? Go off the deep end, of course, by coercing his secretary, a young illegal immigrant from Mexico named Naranja (Liza Fernandez) to join him on a road trip.

Credit to Sheppard and director Kevin Fox, who turn self-doubt and self-loathing into something madcap and quirky. And when Bill and Naranja finally kiss, it happens so gradually and haltingly, it's actually sexy in its own pathetic way.

Fox has crafted a smart and efficient staging for this Precious Mettle production. The tiny Side Studio space is dominated by a sunburst graphic design (by Brian Sydney Bembridge) of mustard yellow and metallic gold that is sort of tacky, sort of mid-century fabulous.

See it while you still can--it closes this weekend.

Through Sunday at The Side Studio, 1520 W. Jarvis Ave.; \$15;
773-989-0760.

ANGRYWHITEGUYINCHICAGO.COM

REVIEW (BLOGGER)

MONDAY, AUGUST 29, 2005

BUICKS

Jen & I went to see a play directed by a friend of hers from school. Kevin Fox. "Buicks" by Julian Sheppard. It was really, genuinely awesome.

The play was performed by four actors, three of whom were spectacularly good. It was performed at the Side Studio (which is less like a theater and more like a living room with a lot of plastic chairs. Sheppard sets up a Buick salesman who, in the opening scene, sells a man a Buick because he convinces him that to purchase a Porsche is a lie - that the buyer IS a Buick, that his life is a Buick, and to purchase a car flashier than a Buick is to declare to the world a dissatisfaction with his life and true self. The metaphor sets up the salesman's life as, throughout the course of the play, his wife leaves him and he abducts his Latino receptionist on a cross country search for wife and children.

The script is excellent - tightly written, smart and funny. The cast is superb - David Parkes as the Salesman is a virtuoso of smarm and pitiful rage, Kathy Logelin as his wife creates a complex and multilayered performance in just a few scenes, and Liza Fernandez as the receptionist with a dream of becoming a Buick salesman is nothing short of spectacular. Scott Kennedy plays multiple roles pretty much as the same mumbly character and would've seemed fine if not in the company of three superstar talents.

The direction was amazingly concise and fast paced - using nothing more than a large metal desk (like a high school teacher's desk from 1963), a couple of chairs, a handful of props, and some fucking brilliant lighting by Brian Sidney Bembridge, Fox allows the play to take us on the journey without reminding us of the severe limitations of the venue. His direction of the actors is subtle and intelligent and his staging is creative and, like a Frank Lloyd Wright building, uses the natural resources surrounding it to create power and unity.

It was closing night, so I can't recommend it but I can guarantee I'll be there the next time Kevin directs.

<http://donhall.blogspot.com/2005/08/buicks.html>

The Chicago Critic Review

Buicks

By Julian Sheppard

Directed by Kevin Fox

Produced by **Precious Mettle Theatre**

At **The Side Studio**

1520 W. Jarvis

Chicago, IL

Call 773-989-0760, tickets \$15

Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 PM

Sundays at 7 PM

Running time 2 hrs, 10 min with intermission

Through August 28, 2005

Buicks rides smoothly, is comfortable and runs deftly on four cylinders!

John Gawlik and **Kevin Fox** have produced a terrific new model in ***Buicks***. ***Buicks*** is fresh, flowing, extremely well acted, competently written and worthy of an audience. In its Chicago premiere, ***Buicks*** features **David Parkes** (Bill), one of the finest leading men in Chicago with support from the versatile **Scott Kennedy** (in various role including a cold father figure) and yeomen work from **Kathy Logelin** as Kathy and a stellar, full-ranged turn from newcomer **Liza Fernandez** as Naranja.



David Parkes & Liza Fernandez

The play utilizes the automobile metaphor '***Buicks***' to capture more than the line of General Motors cars Bill sells. This clever symbolism asks: "Are you a **Porsche** or a **Buick**?" This show owes much to **Arthur Miller** and his famous lost soul, Willie Loman, but here Bill is surly deluded and in denial but he is redeemable.

David Parkes' wide ranging acting skills were running smoothly as he navigated the emotional pitfalls of playwright **Julian Sheppard's** script. **Parkes'** performance makes the trip to Rogers Park worth it. He has a realistic, flawed, tortured and troubled man who, despite a successful car dealership, a wife and two kids, is in denial as to the depths of his unhappiness.

We witness his unraveling culminating with his family leaving him with only a note on the kitchen table. Bill is cold to his wife, has a love/hate for his father and is jealous of his son's early success. When his wife leaves him after 14 years, he takes his secretary on a journey of redemption as he struggles to find his happiness and gather some meaningfulness to his existence. Playwright **Julian Sheppard** is influenced by **Arthur Miller** with doses of **Sam Sheppard** and some **David Mamet** thrown in. This emotionally wrenching peek into how the corruption of the American Dream and self-delusional living can destroy a man, a marriage and a family is in the hands of a craftsman.



David Parkes & Scott Kennedy

The motel scenes where Naramja, **Lisa Fernandez**, sporting a cute Mexican accent, role plays selling a **Buick Park Avenue** to her boss, Bill, is precious. **Fernandez** takes Naramja from illegal immigrant to confident participant in her version of the American Dream. She helps Bill's redemption process along the way. This show is smart, surprising and believable. It is full of raw language, gritty references and emotional outburst as well as much dark humor.

You'd be hard pressed to find stronger performances anywhere, especially with the impact of the miniscule **The Side Project** space. For \$15 this ticket plays like a \$50 show. Don't miss this little gem. This should be your "August" show. Take it for a 'test drive.'

Highly Recommended

[Tom Williams](#)

Tom99@chicagocritic.com for comments

August 6, 2005

Review by [Eric Tanyavutti](#)

Heartfelt, Raw, and Genuine

Written by **Julian Sheppard** and sharply directed by **Kevin Fox**, *Buicks* opens at a Buick car dealership in Fresno, California with Bill (**David Parkes**), a slick car salesman, trying to hook Dick, a customer (**Scott Kennedy**). He asks Dick what his dream car is, what it would be (other than a Buick of course), and what it could do if it could do anything - it is his dream car, after all. Then Bill refutes the dream. "You're a Buick," he says. The Buick, while not a luxury car, is serviceable and dependable - a good car. Bill tells Dick that he has a good life - a good job, good kids, and a good wife. The Buick, like his life, fits him, and for Dick not to accept it would be as if he weren't accepting himself. Such is the analogy between Buicks, life, and dreams that sets the tone of the play.

Bill's own life is a stark contrast to the picture he paints for Dick in the opening scene. From his distant relationship with his wife Kathy (**Kathy Logelin**) and two children, to conversations with a disappointed father in a nursing home, to work friends who don't act like friends at all, Bill is a tired man who changes topics during arguments and shies away from conflict. Things spiral out of control when Kathy, tired of living with a man who hates his life, leaves him for good and takes the two children. In a series of strange events, Bill manages to rope his office assistant Naranja (**Liza Fernandez**), an illegal Mexican immigrant, on a road trip to find Kathy and his kids by promising to sponsor her for a green card.



What's interesting is that we expect Bill to find his wife and, in an act of contrition, to make a heartfelt apology. What we get instead, is a vignette of subtle, moving scenes between the charming and sweet Naranja and the world weary and unhinged Bill. The play is about the relationship between the two and it's surprising and appropriate all at the same time. In Naranja, there is the hope of the American dream, living the life she's always wanted to live. It doesn't matter that she makes little money or that (as Bill constantly probes) she doesn't have a boyfriend. She both admires and envies Bill, and his life. Bill asks: "Why do you want to be an American citizen?" Naranja replies: "To be a real person." Her character is a counterpoint to Bill's. Bill's life is the American dream gone awry. In a drunken scene, Bill notes that he's a Buick - in reference to his opening salesman scene - and that he "wants to crash the car." He's upset with his life, the way it has turned out, and wants to start over. They're two characters who

want the same thing, but by virtue of their backgrounds and lives, they're also two characters who are pointing in opposite directions.

The great thing about *Buicks* is the pacing and writing, none of which would succeed without the outstanding cast. The particular standouts are Bill, played by **David Parkes**, and Naranja, played by **Liza Fernandez**. **David** plays Bill with extraordinary depth, and range, and while you get a sense of Bill as a consummate salesman, you learn a lot of his character in his most raw moments, when he pounds the desk in anger or wells up in a tender moment of emotion, voice breaking and eyes red. Counter to **David** is Liza who is delightful to watch as an energetic and charming Naranja. In a scene where Naranja wants to convince Bill that she can sell cars, she does so with energy and zeal, in a thick, breathless Mexican accent that, while difficult to understand, is so infectious and bright, it's difficult not to laugh and smile. The considerable strength of the cast carries the superbly written play with such natural ease that you often forget you're watching a play. The varied scenes of humor, anger, and tenderness, instead, paints not one but two rich and realistic characters - characters that you could have pulled straight from the street, with their own various problems and concerns, dreams and disappointments, and placed directly into the theater.

Recommend

eric@chicagocritic.com for comments

THEATER

Little big man

Buicks proves the Chicago adage of no small parts, just small spaces

By Christopher Platt

"I've come to realize that a little of me goes a long way," David Parkes says. The respected, ferociously chewy actor, whose performances are consistently noted for their large-as-life proportions (and sometimes just a hair larger), recognizes the occasional need for restraint. That's just one of the reasons he jumped at the offer to do *Buicks*, a four-actor play at the Side Studio—a theater so tiny there's hardly room to jump at anything.

Seeing large actors in a play in a small space is a pleasure Chicagoans get to take for granted. The Side Studio is the embodiment of that privilege. The resident home of the ambitious company the Side Project, the narrow, corridor-shaped room in Rogers Park has been compared to a shoebox by nearly every critic who's ever walked through the door. Yet this venue, which barely seats more than 30, regularly sees sophisticated, award-winning actors tromping across its boards.

And the tromping is part of the appeal. "You can feel the footsteps of the actors in your own feet because your feet are on the same freaking floor," says *Buicks* director Kevin Fox. A happy, been-there actor taking his first crack at directing with the newly formed Precious Mettle Theatre Company (the latest of many troupes to rent the Side Studio for experimental projects), Fox says his favorite résumé credits include multiple shows in cheek-to-jowl venues.

A particularly visceral memory is a production of Arthur Miller's concentration-camp drama *Incident at Vichy* at Writers' Theatre,

in the days when all of that Glencoe company's productions were staged in the back of a bookstore, in a space no bigger than a cubbyhole. "You could hear [the audience] breathing," Fox recalls, then adds with a hint of self-deprecation, "and not just because they were so old, which of course they were. As the tension in the show grew, you could hear their breath drawing out. It was totally in sync with what was happening on stage."

"You could hear [the audience] breathing, and not just because they were so old."

Using 27 chairs in two rows, and another island of six chairs in an opposing corner, *Buicks*' funky variation on theater-in-the-round (the layout is closer to theater-in-the-trapezoid) forces intimacy and allows the actors no unexposed angles. The effect, Fox believes, is perfectly aligned with the script. The conversations in playwright Julian Sheppard's story about a self-deluded car salesman in a crumbling marriage have a confidentiality about them that Fox thinks belongs in tight confines. "The sense I want people to have is that they're eavesdropping on a conversation they're not supposed to hear."

Fox, a full-time performer who has taken the past year off to play father to his nine-month-old daughter Morgan, thought of Parkes as soon as he read *Buicks*. Parkes, who knew he would play the showy and defiant Sir Thomas More this winter in TimeLine Theatre's *A Man for All Seasons*, recognized that the opportunity to play something less emotive would be a healthy move.

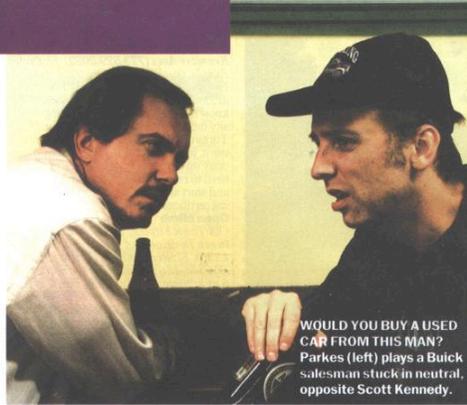
"The scale of the piece is like the scale of the space," Parkes says. "And given my recent track record, that seemed like the right thing to do."

Parkes's philosophy about such projects explains why Chicagoans get to see an inordinate amount of them: The money doesn't matter. "I don't have any delusions that I'm going to make my living as an actor in this town," the 45-year-old Parkes confesses. "So I can pick the projects that I think will feed me as an actor."

His past year is a case in point: The After Dark Award-winning actor appeared in Steppenwolf and About Face's *One Arm*, won critical approval for his performance as a maniacal newspaper magnate in TimeLine's *Pravda* (he's also a company member there) and now finds himself at the Side Project, where all the chichi credits in the world don't matter unless you can adjust to the dimensions of the room.

"You can't fake anything in there," Fox says. "You don't have to push it. You just have to feel it, and the audience will be able to see it. It's like television, only the acting is good."

***Buicks* is parked at the Side Studio. See Fringe & storefront.**



WOULD YOU BUY A USED CAR FROM THIS MAN? Parkes (left) plays a Buick salesman stuck in neutral, opposite Scott Kennedy.

Reviews



MORNING GLORY Helmond fans away the lingering past.

Morning's at Seven

By Paul Osborn. Dir. Jessica Thebus. With Katherine Helmond. Drury Lane Theatre Water Tower Place (see Resident companies).

We're steeped in familiar by-gones: A small-town family lives in two side-by-side houses with nothing to occupy the relatives' time but gossiping about each other. Yet there's one way in which Osborn's 1939 comedy is almost radical: It's about elderly people. Now that this work is as old as its characters, it's sobering to consider how few plays since its premiere deal seriously with main characters over the age of 65. At its best, this light-touch comedy about four sisters, three husbands and one son who question what their lives have meant gets at the inevitability of regret, the jolting end-of-life knowledge that whatever life you lived is the only one you get.

Strange, then, that the resonance we constantly suspect is just around the corner never arrives. Thebus wants to capture the leisure pace of these seemingly placid Midwestern lives to slowly expose their long-buried resentment—especially that of Cora, who shares her home with her unmarried sister, Aaronetta (Helmond), who's in lifelong, not-so-secret love with Cora's hubbie. So much talent is on copious display here: from the top-drawer actors to the inviting back-porch set to those aprons worthy of their own museum exhibit. Yet Thebus keeps the tone too subdued, the rhythm too even, as if everything were timed to the stubbornly unvarying beat of a metronome. Each exit, entrance and line is technically proficient, but never fluctuated or just a tad unexpected. As the old maid, Helmond supplies the one performance that sparkles with the sense of a life lived, rather than lines learned.—*Novid Parsi*

THEATER

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