

## Previews and Reviews

# Deathtrap is spellbinding

by René Babich

To kill or not to kill is not the question. Who to kill, how to get rid of the evidence and how to write a mystery are the questions being addressed in Ira Levin's mystery *Deathtrap* put on by The Actor's Workshop Theatre Company In-Residence at Dowling College.

While young Hamlet might cringe at the flagrant disregard for human life in this play, it is a compelling commentary on materialism, self-preservation and the ability of a human being to disregard his morals in order to try and save himself from failure. It is also a gripping mystery that is supremely ironic in that, Sidney Bruhl, played by Greg Bodkin, expends all of his energy creating the perfect mystery in reality but cannot write one.

The play's director, John Monteleone, who is the Company's founder/producer/artistic director, has done an excellent job setting the stage for this spellbinding mystery.

Set in the round, the study of Sidney Bruhl, the play's main character, invites the audience in as they surround the stage. Monteleone also has the actors break through the conventional barriers of the stage from time to time, by setting props the actors must use amidst the audience. The combination of the round theater and coming into the audience forces us to be, in some sense, active in the play.

The setting is clever in that, almost at all times, the audience feels they are part of the diabolical plot going on in the play.

Bruhl, the aging playwright, utters the first word of the play with convincing venom: "Deathtrap," he says to his wife.

For an audience who has never seen or read the play, Levin's mystery is quite suspenseful. We are convinced when Bruhl explains to his wife, Myra,

that he has just received a play from a novice playwright and that the work is magnificent.

He fools her into believing he is monumentally jealous and may even kill the young man and steal his play.

Myra, played by Susan Walmsley, is a convincing actress who makes us believe she is shaken by her husband's ravings. She also has a weak heart and until Act 1, Scene 3, we see that she has minor attacks as her husband scares her more and more.

When the young playwright comes to the Bruhl home under the guise of being instructed by Bruhl, we believe she is truly frightened of what her husband will do to him.

Little do we know that Bruhl and the young playwright, Clifford Anderson (played by Ray Gobes Jr.) are actually homosexual lovers and the real plot here is to give Myra a heart attack so they can get her money and be together.

After Sidney pretends to kill Clifford, Myra falls apart and seems to be on the edge of a breakdown. Walmsley is at her best in the play here as she gets closer and closer to the edge. She walks around the study with a shawl draped over her shoulders and has the demeanor of a soul who has damned herself.

Her epiphany comes when she says, "All the time there was a part of me that was hoping you would do it." The resignation of the woman to her blackness is sad, moving and the actress does a fine job portraying it.

When Clifford bursts into the room supposedly from the grave and bludgeons Sidney with a brick, it's too much for Myra and she has a heart attack and dies.

At this point we may believe that the play should end, but Levin continues to probe the mind of Sidney Bruhl, who still cannot write a play.

Bruhl's character is despicable in a way. Once an extremely successful and lauded playwright, he has hit a snag in his career. After writing many plays, he now has a block and will do anything to get himself on top again: Even kill his wife who threatens his happiness with his lover: Even kill his lover who threatens his freedom by wanting to write a play based on what they did.

Levin's address of self-preservation is frightening in that, one can relate to Bruhl while at the same time be repulsed by him. Greg Bodkin's acting in the play is the best of the company. He is tortured and driven and he is very sad because while he devises these brilliant plots to kill, he annihilates the writer in himself. The murders he commits leave him powerless to create fiction and his intentions of keeping himself on top are flushed away by the decay of the human being.

Helga Ten Dorp, played by Ruth Stewart, is the psychic neighbor who, although she is on the right track, gets confused by the messages sent out by Bruhl. She sees evil and figures out what's going to happen, but Bruhl's plot is so clever and complex, she cannot get all the information correct.

Ten Dorp is a very likeable character and Stewart does justice to the eccentric woman. She achieves eccentricity and humor well and at the same time endears herself to the audience.

C. Dale Yearly also does a good job portraying Porter Milgrim, the seemingly stiff lawyer who turns out to be a dirty old man. Yearly is funny and effectively makes the audience believe he is very prim. Levin turns the knife one final time at the end of the play when Ten Dorp discovers that Milgrim is really an obscene phone caller, however the play ends on a much less serious note.

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The only character in the play who is pretty much exactly what she seems to be is Ten Dorp. Even Myra Bruhl has secrets and lies stored away. She never told her husband how much money she had while she was alive.

Ray Gobes Jr. has his moments of fine acting in the play like when he is faced with Sidney who intends to kill him. At that moment, the terror of the character is real in the actor and we feel his fear.

All in all, Actor's Theatre Workshop Company does an outstanding job with this fine play. The lead acting by Greg Bodkin is moving — he is able to illicit both anger and sympathy from the audience and that is important for a main character.

Susan Walmsley, Ray Gobes Jr., Ruth Stewart and C. Dale Yearly were also commendable.

Monteleone's staging was superb. He chose wisely when setting the stage in the round because nothing draws an audience in deeper than when they are practically on stage.

*Deathtrap* can and should be seen at Dowling College's Performing Arts Center now until December 2. Tickets are \$12 on Friday evening, \$14 on Saturday and \$10 on Sunday afternoon. For information call 244-3399.