

Victorian's Secret

River Cities Reader – October 8, 2008 – by Mike Schulz

Playwright Patrick Hamilton's *Angel Street*, the season-closing presentation at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre, was the stage inspiration for George Cukor's mystery/thriller *Gaslight*, so it's kind of appropriate that the production's gas lights are perhaps its cleverest touch. I'm often remiss in praising the design for Richmond Hill shows, especially given the inherent (and considerable) challenges of theatre-in-the-round. But *Angel Street* is so technically assured and aesthetically pleasing that I found myself grinning in the first mood-setting *seconds* of director Tom Morrow's Victorian drama. (I'm calling it a drama rather than a mystery and/or thriller because the show isn't really much of either. But more on that later.)

Set in late-19th Century London, *Angel Street* concerns a possible murderer who may be inspiring his wife's insanity, and its prelude could almost be a how-to guide on imparting theatrical information and exposition nonverbally. The faraway *clack-clack-clacking* of a horse-drawn carriage effectively establishes a haunted atmosphere (Jennifer Kingry provides expert sound design), and with a bare minimum of set pieces, we quickly glean how dour and uninviting the play's central dwelling is, clued in by the silence, the intentionally gloomy lighting (more Kingry design, equally expert), and Rebecca May's Bella Manningham costume, which can rightfully be called scene-stealing, if not *show-stealing*.

It's a shame that *Angel Street* only grants its actors one outfit apiece, as costumer Jean Melillo's wardrobe selections reveal status, personality, and temperament so subtly that you wish there were more of them to appreciate. The formalwear donned by Tom Naab's sinister Jack Manningham, a dandy gone to seed, suggests a grubby soul projecting a wealth and privilege he doesn't possess, which makes him a perfect visual counterpart for James V. Driscoll's benevolent Inspector Rough, whose eye-catching brocade vest hints at the mischief beneath his business-minded exterior.

Bella's gown, though, is really something. Outfitted in a floor-length, form-fitting, brick-red dress with black lace, May wears it with such stiff-backed poise that her character is clear even before she speaks: This *isn't* a dress; it's an exquisitely detailed straightjacket, which is just what the tortured Bella *should* be wearing. Even the servants' outfits are just right, with Lisa Kahn's courteous drudge Elizabeth in standard maid attire while her opposite number, Molly McLaughlin's flirtatious Nancy, is decked out in playful green and white stripes; Melillo's contributions, as they oftentimes are, are beautiful, but better still, they're *smart*.

Angel Street's design and tech elements are smart *throughout*; it's the show itself I found underwhelming. Naab is engaging and impressively focused, yet his character is so overtly menacing from minute one - he's just a mustache-twirl away from Snidely Whiplash - that we miss out on much of the tale's subtlety and mystery. And while May looks stunning, she doesn't seem at all confident about playing her character's psychoses; the earnest actress gives the role an admirable shot, but May's hesitant delivery makes Bella seem less crazed than merely confused, and even a little simple-minded. (You can hear Bella's madness in the script - "It's behind the cupboard, I suppose... ?" - but not in the readings.)

Driscoll enlivens the proceedings with his expected wit and energy - and has a terrific near-running gag in which the inspector apologetically retrieves his misplaced hat - and Kahn's beleaguered rationality and McLaughlin's sauciness are entertaining in their limited doses. Yet I found too many of *Angel Street's* scenes rife with dead air (when one character in a two-person scene leaves the room, the other is given nothing to do but stare at the doorway and wait for his or her return) and too much of its action dawdling, which hurts a play in which so little actually *occurs*; Hamilton's script is really only dramatic *psychologically*, and psychological complexity is exactly what's missing here.

Thankfully, though, the show is a pleasure to look at, which returns us to the gas lights. Four wall lamps hang on the set's corners, and we watch as Nancy lights them with a match, their weak orange glow achieving the radiance of a fully lit candle ... and it might not be until much later that you realize the lamps aren't lit at all - or rather, are lit *electrically*. I have no idea how Kingry pulled off this effect, but it's a sensational one, and the ruse might've been completely successful on Thursday had Naab, during Act II, not attempted to increase the illumination on one lamp only to have the brightness on its *neighboring* lamp increase instead.

The moment elicited a big laugh, but it was a good-natured, appreciative laugh - the kind that occurs when an audience is already having a great time and is less bothered than hugely amused by a technical faux pas - and this positive vibe was felt in Richmond Hill's theatre all evening long. (During his curtain call, people actually booed Naab for his villainy, causing the actor, and the audience, to laugh.) The production may have been missing some magic, but happily, Angel Street's designers - and Thursday's crowd - provided plenty of their own.

'Angel Street' turns up the gaslight

QC Times - October 08, 2008 - by David Burke

"Angel Street" is one of those classic scripts that community theaters feel the need to revive every now and again. (A poster for it from the early 1960s hangs in the stairwell at Playcrafters Barn Theatre in Moline, for example.)

Richmond Hill Players in Geneseo, Ill., is taking its turn with the show, concluding this weekend, and although the production is serviceable, it's a bit tough to see what the fuss is all about.

Better known as its movie adaptation, "Gaslight," it's set in 19th-century London, where Jack Manningham (Tom Naab) is trying to console his mentally unstable wife (Rebecca May) while plotting behind her back.

With a thick moustache and an occasionally cocked eyebrow, Naab has the makings of a delicious villain. (He even received some belated boos during the curtain call on opening night.)

May looks the part of Bella, appearing as though she was plucked off a cameo brooch. But much of her performance is one-note, with a delivery that's far too stilted and unnatural.

Local theater veteran James Driscoll comes to the rescue as Inspector Rough, the retired Scotland Yard detective who becomes Bella's only ally and confidante.

Driscoll has a natural delivery of the British accent that begins each line with a whisper and makes its way to a credible dialect. (Think Hugh Grant plus a couple of decades.)

While Naab has more of a Bostonian accent and May has no discernable dialect, Driscoll has it nailed.

Molly McLaughlin, who plays, along with Lisa Kahn, two of the couple's servants, occasionally delivers the accent, but she also slips out of it. McLaughlin portrays a nice balance of rebel and seductress while Kahn's character is there to advance the story.

Driscoll's inspector is convinced that Naab's Manningham is the same person who murdered a woman in the same house 15 years earlier, and he has to convince May's character that he is on the up-and-up.

Director Tom Morrow has an obvious affinity for the show, as evidenced in his program notes. He well utilizes the in-the-round staging at the Barn Theatre and keeps a brisk pace, but it doesn't quite create a compelling show.

Technical director Jennifer Kingry provided an unintentional laugh on opening night, when Naab turned up the power on the essential-to-the-script gaslight and the flame rose in another sconce facing it.

Gaffes and a few performances aside, if you want to see one of the stalwarts in the community theater genre, head to "Angel Street."