

THEATER

October – What A Theater Month!

Local Theaters Start Off Strong

BY BRAD HATHAWAY

They say that in spring a young man's fancy turns to love. In fall, however, a theater lover's fancy turns to – well, to theater. Ever since the time before air conditioning, when theaters used to be closed through the hot months, the traditional theater season has run from fall to spring. Many local theater companies try to open the new season with what they hope will be their strongest new offerings.

This month will see the opening of many tempting shows. Studio Theatre's "Moonlighting" is already lit up, Arena Stage's "Quality of Life" is shining on their temporary stage in Crystal City and GALA has opened the U.S. premiere of an unorthodox comedy/drama from Argentina.

Of the three, my favorite hands down has been the slightly quirky but beautifully written and presented "Quality of Life" which will play through Oct. 18. It is a story told with warmth and humor as two cousins and their husbands come together while suffering very different kinds of extreme pain. One couple has lost their only child in an unspecified horrific criminal act. The other is preparing for death as the husband's cancer progresses.

What's more, the action takes place in the burned out remnants of one family's home in the hills of California where a wildfire has reduced the couple to life in a yurt, the kind of tent Mongolian nomads have used on the steppes of Central Asia for centuries.

Sound depressing? Not in the hands of playwright Jane Anderson. She imbues each of the four characters with a great belief in the goodness of life – or, in the case of the grieving father, the goodness of the afterlife. He's a born-again Christian who can't

accept the cancer victim's decision to opt out of the final, painful stages of the cancer.

The four-sided arguments which ensue are beautifully written by Anderson and skillfully performed. Stephen Schnetzer is the cancer-weakened man who draws strength from his loving wife (Johanna Day) and relief from his high-tech marijuana

Sprengelburd of Buenos Aires. Performed under the gloriously restored dome of the Tivoli Theatre on 14th Street in Columbia Heights, "Lúcido" ("Lucid" in English) is another play with a cast of four with each character written in distinctive voice. The voice here, however,



(l-r) Annette O'Toole as Dinah, Johanna Day as Jeannette and Stephen Schnetzer as Neil in "The Quality of Life" at Arena Stage in Crystal City. Photo: Scott Suchman

bong. Annette O'Toole is his wife's cousin reeling from her own pain. It is a pain that you come to understand completely and feel deeply. Particularly noteworthy is the writing of the part of O'Toole's husband, played with understatement by Kevin O'Rourke. Anderson gives his views full and fair representation although it is clear that the author's own predictions fall closer to the values of the other couple.

Lúcido at GALA

GALA's script is from Rafael

is in Spanish with English surtitles projected on a strip above the stage. That means that non-Spanish speakers will have to work just a bit harder to follow the sometimes convoluted plot, but it is an effort that is highly rewarding.

This is a dream play, enacted on a strikingly colorful, surrealistic set by Giorgos Tsappas with sliding panels that change the entire tone of the piece from an open blue sky-like image to a confined, hardened structure of sunset red. On it, the intersecting dreams of a woman, her son and her daughter

play out and interact. The enjoyable and engaging task for the audience is to figure out just whose dream it really is.

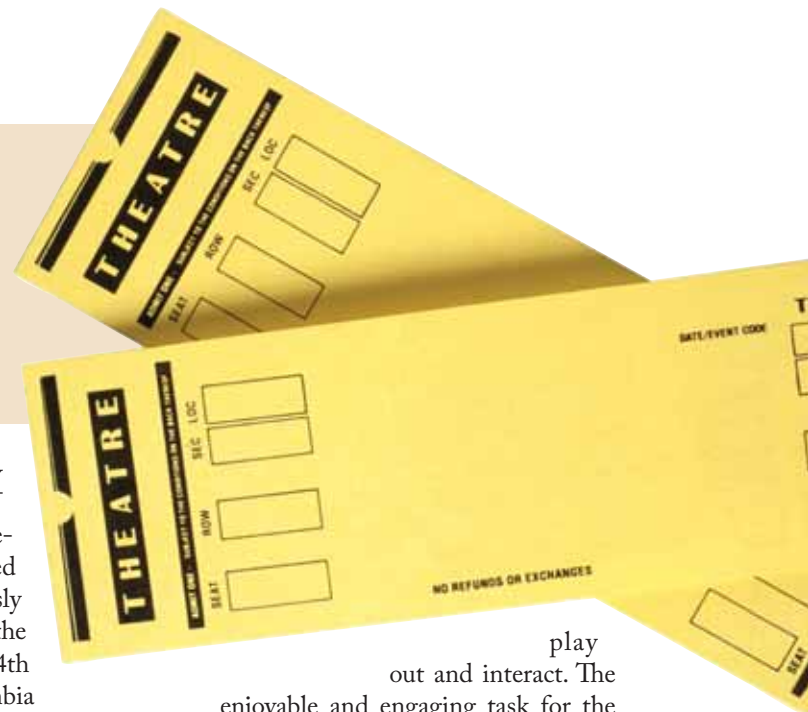
The common element of the dreams seems to be that the mother had the daughter donate a kidney to the son when both were too young to make such decisions for themselves. Lucrecia Basualdo is the mother who is concerned that her daughter, played with a light ethereal touch by Anabel Marciano, will take the kidney back.

Director José Carrasquillo returns to Washington from his new home in Puerto Rico to direct the play. He calls Sprengelburd's text "phenomenological" due to its style of repetitions and interruptions.

"Moonlight" at Studio

The other new show already opened has a distinctive script as well, as you might expect since it is a play by Harold Pinter, one of the most distinctive writers of the last half century whose work is often marked by what his enthusiasts refer to as "ambiguity" while his detractors simply find it "confusing." His "Moonlight" which is now playing at Studio Theatre is not likely to resolve the debate between ambiguity and confusion as it presents a dysfunctional family through a series of events and discussions, the connections between which are often unexplained.

Still, the production is marked by some performances of note, especially that of the venerable Ted van Griethuysen who is just this side of mesmerizing as an elderly former civil servant on his deathbed. He's more vigorous than many men in their





The cast of GALA's production of "Lúcido". Photo: Daniel Troconis

prime and it is a good thing he succumbs to sleep from time to time so you can watch the other performers do their fine work.

Among those others are Tom Story and Anatol Yusef as the man's sons, who avoid at all cost the task of going to their father's side, Libby Woodbridge as his daughter who is obviously anxious for a reunion, and Sybil Lines as his wife who stays by his bedside despite obvious difficulties in their marital relationship.

And More

The adventurous and often offbeat Taffety Punk Theatre Company's all-female version of Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure" will also be up and running at the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop by the time this article is in print.

Through the month, there will be new fare opening up all over town. The Washington Stage Guild, which hasn't had a full production for way too long, will open a set of two of George Bernard Shaw's one-act plays under the title "Strange Bedfellows" at the Callan Theatre on the campus of The Catholic University.

Constellation Theatre will present the farce "A Flea In Her Ear" at Source Theatre on 14th Street, the Shakespeare Theatre

Company opens Ben Johnson's comedy "The Alchemist" at the Lansburgh and Studio adds the odd "expressionist" musical "The Adding Machine" to their offerings. Theater J will add a production of Neil Simon's "Lost in Yonkers," the first time that show has played in our town since its pre-Broadway tryout in 1991.

The national touring production of the Broadway hit "Jersey Boys," which tells the story of Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons complete with fabulous renditions of their biggest hits, will be at the National all month long (and on into December) while the month's offerings comes to a climax with the Kennedy Center bringing in the Sydney Theatre Company of Australia's production of Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire" directed by Liv Ullman with Cate Blanchett in the role of Blanche DuBois.

See? I told you it was quite a month!

Brad Hathaway is the editor/reviewer for Potomac Stages, a website and email service covering theater in the metro area (www.PotomacStages.com). He is a member of the American Theatre Critics Association and serves on its executive board. He and his wife live on Capitol Hill. He can be reached by email at Brad@PotomacStages.com. ★

Phone And Web Listings For The Theaters Mentioned In This Article:

Arena Stage 202-554-9066 - www.arenastage.org

Constellation Theatre Company 202-280-8101 - www.constellationtheatre.org

GALA 202-234-7174 - www.galatheatre.org

The Kennedy Center 202-467-4600 - www.kennedy-center.org

National Theatre - 202-628-6161 - www.nationaltheatre.org

The Shakespeare Theatre Company 202-547-1122 - [ww.shakespearetheatre.org](http://www.shakespearetheatre.org)

Studio Theatre - 202-332-3300 - www.studiotheatre.org

Taffety Punk Theatre Company - 202-261-6612 - www.taffetypunk.com

Washington Stage Guild - 240-582-0050 - www.stageguild.org

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