

Whodunit's plot full of twists and turns

By Adrian Chamberlain, Times Colonist, April 24, 2010

REVIEW

What: Silver Dagger

Where: Langham Court Theatre

When: To May 8

Rating: 3 (out of five)

Playwright David French is famous in Canada for his Mercer plays, such as *Leaving Home*, which chronicle the lives of a Newfoundland family with humour and pathos. Another popular French work is *Jitters*, a rollicking backstage farce.

The Victoria Theatre Guild has revived one of his lesser-known offerings. *Silver Dagger* (1993) is the story of a nefarious mystery book writer whose real life comes to resemble one of his bestsellers. We're presented with murder, adultery, blackmail and more. The script is self-consciously stuffed with the sort of hair-pin turns and elaborate deceptions that delight fans of this literary genre. To paraphrase *Black Adder*, *Silver Dagger* twists and turns like ... a twisty-turny thing.

The guild does a credible job with a challenging, overly clever script; this is a long, text-heavy play. A difficult thing is striking the right tone -- French calls for an effortless balance among drama, comedy and irony. On Thursday night the cast captured this off and on. Sometimes, perhaps in an effort to embrace a heightened style, actors too often delivered lines as though in quotation marks -- something that runs the risk of losing an audience.

Still, many diehard mystery aficionados will be mostly interested in figuring out whodunit, or at least, puzzling out what's going on.

Randy Parker is well cast as the villainous Steven Marsh, whose inveterate lying serves him well as a novelist and less so in real life. Parker, a burly fellow with good stage presence, was able convey his character's oily, smug confidence. He tended to stumble on lines early on, but ultimately overcame this.

Kathy Macovichuk plays his increasingly exasperated wife Pam, a university prof who's worried her hubby's bizarre exploits will result in scandal and ruin her career. The hard-working cast includes Wendy Magahay, Celia Reid, Brayden Reger and Lisa Lamarre.

Those who lose their way within French's complex (and sometimes bloodless) storyline can always admire the set. Dan Thachuk has hatched a lovely recreation of an upper middle-class living room. Its defining element is a pair of classical arches which, when illuminated by Karrie Wolfe's superior lighting design, resemble a de Chirico painting. This adds subtle spookiness to the atmosphere. Screens on each end of the set also work well.

A final note: Staged gunshots ought to sound something like gunshots. The dramatic effect is lost when the audience hears a sound like a velvet mallet striking an aluminum pie-plate.

achamberlain@tc.canwest.com

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