

BACKSTAGE

The Boarding House

by Les Spindle

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About 20 minutes into Ann Noble's play, set in an upper-crust Boston boarding house in 1945, a character suddenly starts taking Jerry Lewis-type pratfalls all over the stage. What initially seemed a nostalgic seriocomedy suddenly feels like a knockabout farce. Cohesiveness of tone and focused storytelling aren't Noble's strong points in her intermittently entertaining glimpse at the aftereffects of World War II on returning servicemen and their loved ones. Yet Interact Theatre Company's production isn't without its rewards, thanks to the efforts of director Darin Anthony, a strong cast, and a marvelous design team.

There's the look and feel of a lush 1940s film comedy in the performances and in Anthony's slick staging -- highlighted by Joel Daavid's gorgeous set, J. Kent Inasy's superb lighting, and Sherry Linnell's glamorous costumes. Yet Noble was clearly aiming for something with more psychological depth than what emerges from her overstuffed but underdeveloped script. Thematic links among the disparate journeys of the love-hungry characters never quite jell. The unmarried Imogen (Alyss Henderson) has overseen the inn since her brother, Dell (Kelly Van Kirk), mysteriously disappeared following his medical discharge from the military. She constantly bickers with Dell's young wife, Sylvia (Amanda Troop), who is captivated by a middle-aged professor (James Calvert) who is staying at the inn. Other characters are the flamboyant, self-deluded Lilah (Rebecca Tilney), carrying on an adulterous affair, and Paul (Matt Crabtree), seeking out the man who impregnated and abandoned his sister in Chicago.

Anthony elicits stylish performances, led by Tilney's delightful turn as the daffy adulteress, combining an Angela Lansbury elegance with a Carole Lombard kookiness. Henderson exudes charm and empathy as the lonely spinster. Calvert offers solid support as the erudite romantic, and Crabtree does creditable work as the bungling would-be sleuth. Van Kirk brings wit and verve to his portrayal of the AWOL spouse, though his character's disturbing personality disorder is at the core of the play's muddled dramaturgic aims. The inhabitants of this House are disarming, but Noble's property needs a stronger foundation.

Presented by Interact Theatre Company at Write Act Repertory Theatre, 6128 Yucca St, Hollywood. Thu.-Sat. 3 & 8 p.m. Apr. 13-Jun. 2. (88) 765-8732.
www.interactla.org.