

Violet Hour at The Lillian Theatre

by Joel Elkins



Why is “quaint” almost always used in the past tense? Does history have a tendency to homogenize and trivialize events the farther back they occurred? If so, what would it feel like now to know that in a few generations, our world will be considered “quaint” and all of us merely players?

Richard Greenberg tackles this and other related issues in his marvelously witty *Violet Hour*, now playing at The Lillian Theatre.

The year is 1919. April 1, 1919, to be exact. The setting is the Manhattan office of John Pace Seaverling (played by Travis Schuldt), a neophyte book publisher. Everywhere the eye can see are piles and piles of papers, on the floor, on the desks, in boxes, some appearing to be floating in the air. The amount of paper and clutter, however, is about to multiply as a rather large package delivered to the office begins to rumble and spew seemingly random pages in the air.

At first, young Seaverling can't be bothered by the page-spewing machine because he finds himself in the midst of a dilemma. It appears the money he received from his father is only enough to open an office and publish a single manuscript, which he must now choose from myriad submissions, including a voluminous and untamed tome written by Denis, his best friend from school (Peter Larney), who desperately needs to get published so as to prove his worth to his prospective father-in-law, and the autobiographical magnus opus of a famous black singer (Karole Foreman), who also happens to be his secret lover. Naturally, and apparently with no regard to literary quality or marketability, the options quickly narrow down to these two.

As both aspiring authors shamelessly exploit their personal connections with Seaverling, adding to the pressure he feels at the thought of disappointing and perhaps alienating one of them, his assistant Gidger (Buck Zachary, understudy for John Billingsley in the performance I saw) manages to get his attention long enough to inform him that the pages overflowing the anteroom are not random after all, but are, in fact, parts of complete books written in the future, most of which appear to be about them..

The unique perspective of themselves provided by these writings evokes many existential questions, including when in the world they learned the word “existential.” Seaverling sees not only what his editorial decision turns out to be, but its eventual effect on those involved. Gidger, on the other hand, finding nary a mention of his own life, while almost everyone around him, including his dog, feature prominently, asks himself the disturbing question if he is merely a “conduit for history.”

The story is a tad convoluted but rich with subcontext and meaningful questions that, like the machine in the anteroom, it spews out nonstop. Richard Greenberg's script is cleverly conceived and intelligently written.

The direction by Darin Anthony and lead actors are uniformly excellent. Schuldts demonstrates range and subtlety unexpected from his role as Dudemeister on *Scrubs*. Even Zachary, whose annoying speaking voice actually turns out to be written into the script, belies the label of merely an understudy. The weak link may have been Lisa Valerie Morgan in the relatively minor role of Denis' high-society fiancée, Rosamund.

Joel Daavid's set design, as usual, is delightful. The backdrop of a busy New York City thoroughfare in sepia tones instantly evokes the time and location of the action, while the wallpaper in the office is cleverly constructed from pages of a book, mirroring the paper mess around the office itself. Luke Moyer enjoys the rare privilege for a lighting designer of arguably playing the title role.

As one of the characters describes it, the title of the play refers to that daily miracle as the sky turns all shades of brilliant colors, signifying when the evening is about to reward you for the day. As I left the Sunday matinee and headed west into a brilliant LA sunset, it may have been my imagination but it appeared a little more violet than usual. In any event, I felt duly rewarded.

Violet Hour plays Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 pm and Sundays at 3 pm through March 13, 2011.

The Lillian Theatre is located at 6322 Santa Monica Blvd. in Hollywood (one block west of Vine).

Ticket prices: \$30.00

Reservations online at <http://www.elephanttheatrecompany.com>, www.plays411.com/violethour or by calling (323) 960-1054.