

Play review: 'Wait Until Dark,' Coach House Players, Kingston

But technical problems mar scary climax

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KINGSTON — Frederick Knott's play "Wait Until Dark" had a successful 374-performance run on Broadway in 1966 and two years in London. It was also revised on Broadway in 1998. But most people over age 21 saw this thriller as the 1967 classic film starring Audrey Hepburn and Alan Arkin. Bravo Network has rated this film's final climax 10th in its Scariest Movie Moments Poll.

What makes this play unique is its climax — so much so, when the film was released, that the studio asked theater owners to turn out all the lights during the last few minutes. This was an effort to duplicate for a movie audience a playgoer's experience of being completely "in the dark." "Wait Until Dark" is not only the title, but also an admonition for its audience.

Good venue for this theater

Coach House Players in Kingston have chosen this play as their 2008 season opener. The intimate house lends itself well to this edge-of-your-seat thriller. The actors are so close that one feels as if we are peeking in the windows of the Hendrix apartment.

Director Barbara Jones and her assistant Susan Cobb have assembled an eight-member cast to tackle not only the dramatic but also the physical demands of this play.

Susi Hendrix, a blind housewife, is doing her best to live a normal life with her photographer husband, Sam. Sam has unknowingly brought trouble into their apartment in the innocent guise of a teddy bear. The teddy bear, given to him by a stranger in Canada, contains heroin that Roat, a psychopathic killer, wants. The teddy bear is missing, taken by a young girl who lives in the apartment building and does errands for the family. Roat sends Sam out on a fool's errand and sends two con men in, Mike Talman to pose as Sam's ex-Marine buddy and a phony police sergeant, Carlino, to retrieve the missing bear.

A well-delineated heroine

As Susi, Tess Brewer turns in a vivid performance, portrays her character as strong and self-sufficient, unwilling to be a victim. This role is challenging for a sighted individual, and Brewer makes a common mistake portraying blindness. She rarely looks directly at the person speaking to her but often looks at things she is touching. Further, it seems strange that she must constantly feel her way around an apartment in which she has lived for six months.

Her scenes with Joseph Bongiorno as Mike Talman are her best. Bongiorno's easy manner and careful watchfulness of Brewer's actions ring true. His portrayal of Talman makes it believable

that Susi would trust him almost immediately and be devastated when she realizes he is conning her.

There is no chemistry between Brewer and Geoff Payden, who portrays Sam Hendrix, Susi's husband. The Hendrixes have been married six months, and it seems the honeymoon is over. Payden seems impatient and anxious to leave her alone.

Jared Whiteford as Carlino is equally unconvincing in his portrayal of the other half of the con-man team. Whiteford is not physically imposing and cannot muster enough menace when he is bullying Susi. He comes off smarmy and mildly creepy.

Alexandra Aird has the task of playing Gloria, which is a role written for a much younger girl, usually between 8 and 12 years old. Aird, who is a junior in high school, turns in a laudable performance, delivering lines that make her seem naive, immature and childish. Still, it is laughable that a teenager living in Greenwich Village would not know how to get to the Port Authority Bus Terminal.

A villain to fear

As Roat, the quintessential villain, Michael Da Torre is impressive. He is particularly fine in his first scene with Talman and Whiteford. He is excellent at changing from mysterious to menacing. He does a credible job with vocal variations when he appears later as Harry Roat Jr. and Sr.

Where this particular production stumbles is in the final climactic scene. The dark is an integral part of this play. The lighting has to be right, yet complete darkness is never achieved. Light is bleeding out from around and behind the refrigerator. Then during the struggle between Roat and Susi, the light from the propped-open refrigerator is supposed to give it a shadowy, eerie quality. It was so bright that it killed the moment.

Coach House Players have another weekend to tighten up their technical problems. It would be a shame to let the technical aspects overshadow the performances by Brewer and Da Torre . Here is an instance where it would be a good thing to make them "Wait Until Dark."

If you go ...

What: "Wait Until Dark" by Frederick Knott

Where: Coach House Players, 12 Augusta St., Kingston

When: 8 p.m. April 25-26, 2 p.m. April 27

Tickets: \$15, \$12 senior citizens and children

Call: 331-2476