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Lab Theater’s ‘Play on!’ is laugh riot

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We are all creatures of habit to varying degrees, and whenever someone or something threatens our routine, chaos is likely to ensue. This is the premise that underlies Rick Abbot’s *Play On!*, which opened over the weekend at Lab Theater in the River District.

Play On! is a play within a play in the time-honored tradition of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Anton Chekhov’s *The Seagull*, Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, and, more recently, Alan Bennett’s *The Habit of Art*. In Abbot’s case, this tried-and-true theatrical device is used to parody self-consumed playwrights who sacrifice realistic dialogue and plotting on the altar of pedantic

literary constructs such as alliteration, consonance and *Dues ex Machina*.

In the case of *Play On*, the stand-in for all those egocentric, self-absorbed, narcissistic playwrights who've been the bane of existence for directors and actors through the centuries is Phyllis Montague. To be fair, Phyl Montague is not some malevolent monster. Worse, she's completely oblivious to the havoc her incessant tweaking and fine-tuning wreaks on her hapless director and cast. Phyllis Montague has never met a line of dialogue she couldn't improve or a plot she couldn't twist, and even she can't remember all the changes she's made by the time the actors are ready for their final dress rehearsal on the night before the opening. But that doesn't stop her from offering more changes, new props and unsolicited directorial input.

The result is disastrous. The amateur actors in Montague's murder-mystery can't keep all of Montague's tweaks and changes straight any longer, and they alternately forget lines or revert back to bits of dialogue that have been altered or dropped. In the ensuing confusion, they, the stage manager and the theater's sound and lighting tech miss cues and fail to produce vital props and sound effects. Rehearsals drag on far into the night, and everyone has to be at their day jobs in the morning. Poor 17-year-old high school student Marla Smitty Smith is beside herself. Her mother is going ballistic over the string of late nights, and the poor girl has a biology exam for which she has yet to study!

With each flubbed line and missed cue, tensions mount and the actors bicker. To lighten the mood (or so he claims), the play's villain cracks tasteless fat jokes directed against one of his cast mates. That, in turn, provokes the ire of her henpecked husband, who's also in the theater group. And all the while, the over-caffeinated and harried director struggles to maintain focus and decorum. Good luck with that. Geraldine Dunbar has as much chance in rescuing Murder So Foul from impending as Captain Edward Smith had of saving the *Titanic* after it struck that iceberg. Come to think of it, Phyllis Montague and the iceberg are not that dissimilar.

When Lab Theater touts its production of *Play On!* as side-splitting comedy, that's not just marketing hyperbole. The play really is that funny, and more. The most hilarious moment in the whole show occurs during the dress rehearsal scene in Act Two when the cast cracks itself up along with the director and all of the stage hands. Their belly laughs and throaty guffaws are infectious, and create the perfect set-up for the Act Three finale, when the show goes live and everything that can go wrong, does – to the playwright's deserved chargin.

While the talented members of Lab's *Play On!* cast have backgrounds in comedy, it is their individual and collective experience in tragedy that makes them well-suited to this production. They understand both cognitively and viscerally what it's like to be in a situation where their time and reputation are on the line but they have little control over the results of their efforts. That's what makes them so relatable individually and as a group. You don't have to be a thespian or theater-goer to love this play. All that's required is that you've worked for a boss or been in an organization that sabotages your every instinct and desire to do a good job by setting you up for failure rather than success.

The irrepressible Gerrie Benzing portrays the playwright we all love to hate. And by the time the play ends, you'll want to stab her in the heart too. But she's more than just the catalyst for all the laughs and confusion. With her flair for melodrama, her backstage antics during the final dress rehearsal will have you in tears (in a good way), and don't lose sight of her during Murder So Foul's opening night. The pain she feels as her play devolves into an ad hoc improv session is almost palpable.

In the role of Henry Benish, Scott Carpenter once again turns in a masterful performance, and Cindi Heimberg is a stitch as his line-grabbling bootylicious wife, Polly, who sucks up to Montague in order to glean a bigger and better role.

Mike Dinko shines as the villain and cast-comedian and prankster. Steven Coe and Rachael Dominguez sizzle as they carry on romantically both on stage and backstage, when they think no one is watching.

Kayleigh O'Connor's performance as the feather-dusting maid deserves special note. Her character appears as a distracted, dim-witted high school student who chronically misses cues and steps on everyone else's lines. But during the live performance, she's the only who is able to keep it together. Her ability to negotiate this character arc is commendable (as is her Act Two prat fall). Play On! is her Lab Theater debut, but we hope to see more of her going forward.

If you google the word "frazzled" or "harried," you'll likely find a head shot of Louise Wigglesworth. She is superb as director Geraldine Dunbar, as is Kendra Weaver, her grumpy, disapproving assistant and stage manager, Aggie Manville. But it's Yvonne Shadrach as Louise the sound and lighting tech who steals the most scenes. One wonders if The Lab's own lighting and sound design queen, Rosie DeLeon, imparted some her wisdom and wry observations to prepare Shadrach for the role.

So, if you find yourself in need of a couple of hours of full-body laughter – and who doesn't these days? – then hurry down to Lab Theater. You won't be disappointed. But bring a handkerchief or some tissues. It really is that funny.

March 11, 2017.

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About the Author



Tom Hall is both an amateur artist and aspiring novelist who writes art quest thrillers. He is in the final stages of completing his debut novel titled "Art Detective," a story that fictionalizes the discovery of the fabled billion-dollar Impressionist collection of Parisian art dealer Josse Bernheim-Jeune, thought by many to have perished during World War II when the collection's hiding place, Castle de Rastignac in southern France, was destroyed by the Wehrmacht in reprisal for attacks made by members of the Resistance operating in the area. A former tax attorney, Tom holds a bachelor's degree as well as both a juris doctorate and masters of laws in taxation from the University of Florida. Tom lives in Estero, Florida with his fiancée, Connie, and their four cats.

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