

## The Playwright Did It: "Out of Sight, Out of Murder," at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre Thru September

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 19 September 2006 22:47

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Offhand, I can think of no type of play more annoying than one that won't stop insisting on how *clever* it is.

The latest production at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre is the comedic mystery *Out of Sight, Out of Murder*, and it should have made for a happily lightweight diversion; beginning with the title, nothing about the show takes itself too seriously, and the cast is filled with game performers looking to provide, and have, a good time.

But, in all honesty, I found the production hard to sit through, and for reasons that go well beyond its bloated two-and-three-quarter-hour running length. With playwright Fred Carmichael thwacking us in the head with his every "clever" comic observation, *Out of Sight ...* proved the *opposite* of lightweight - I found myself depressed by the heavy-handedness of it all.

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Carmichael's conceit - and it isn't a bad one - goes like this: Peter (Joshua Kahn), an author of mysteries, has settled into a spacious manor home to compose his latest thriller. As he begins work, an electrical storm magically causes his fictional characters to spring to life, and Peter is visited by a series of '30s-mystery genre types: a flirtatious matron (Linda McGraw), a bitter spinster (Rae Mary), a stoic butler (John Donald O'Shea), a weepy maid (Ashley Hoskins), an officious lawyer (Cal Taylor), an earnest juvenile (Kevin Maynard), and a blithely egocentric ingénue (Mary Jean Sedlock). Before intermission, one of them will be dead, and Peter and the others - all of whom *realize* they're fictional characters - must use their knowledge of mystery tropes to determine the killer's identity, and whom his (or her) next victim might be.

Sounds like fun, doesn't it? But what's charming in theory is nearly unbearable in practice, as Carmichael doesn't let us discover any of the play's charms for ourselves - he's so busy *underlining* wh

y  
*Out of Sight*

... is smart and funny and, above all, clever, that I, for one, grew more resentful of it as it progressed. Carmichael talks down to his audience in the most insulting of ways, by explaining his every gag and depriving us the pleasure of figuring anything out on our own; it's like someone telling you a joke and then spending five minutes telling you why you should be laughing.

Aside from basic prepositions and conjunctions, I doubt that any word in the script is uttered more frequently than "always." Whenever a character does or says anything "in character," someone will comment on the predictability of the phrase or gesture, as in "That's what the maid *always* does," or "That's how these things *always* work out"; the playwright never stops congratulating himself for understanding what makes mysteries tick, and seems to think that, by showing us that he's *aware* of the genre's clichés, he's actually transcending them. It's a way of appearing clever by knocking others' *lack*

of cleverness, and we're asked to laugh at

*Out of Sight*

... for Carmichael's *admission*

that he doesn't have any fresh ideas.

But the joke is on Carmichael, because when he *does* come up with a borderline-witty notion, he quickly backs away from it; he's as lacking in inspiration as the writers he goofs on. There's an amusing moment when O'Shea's butler busts out of his stiff-upper-lip drollery and bellows up the stairs ("I always wanted to do that," he says), but it never leads to anyone *else*

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acting similarly out-of-character, and Carmichael should be ashamed for his embarrassing resolution to the play's metaphysical conundrum - I'd love to spoil it for you, but instead, just imagine the two least satisfying ways the story could conceivably end. Carmichael gives you one of those endings. And then he gives you the *other* one.

I'm not sure what director Lyle Sears might have done to make all this more palatable, but picking up the pace couldn't have hurt; I'd say that tightening the actors' cues could have shaved a good half-hour from the production. There are some fine comic caricatures on display - the most enjoyable ones coming from O'Shea, Mary, and Karrie McLaughlin's Swedish maid, whose beaming smile isn't seen nearly enough - but, as of Friday's opening-night performance, the conversational rhythms were awkward, and with the playwright making the performers' jobs even tougher than they *should* have been, what I appreciated most were the show's technical aspects. Sears' and Gary Baker's set and Jennifer Kingry's lighting design were just right, and costume chair Cindy Mayfield found a rather stunning black dress for Linda McGraw to wear; "I love that *dress*," whispered a woman behind me. I did, too. It was, sadly, the one element of *Out of Sight, Out of Murder* I *did* love.

*For tickets, call (309) 762-0330.*