

Commie Dearest: "Red Herring," at the Timber Lake Playhouse through July 24

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 18 July 2011 06:00

- [Buy Autodesk Alias Automotive 2014 MAC \(en\)](#)
- [19.95\\$ Many Tricks Usher MAC cheap oem](#)
- [9.95\\$ Lynda.com - Photoshop for Web Design cheap oem](#)
- [Buy Agile Bits 1Password 3 MAC \(en\)](#)
- [Buy OEM Lynda.com - Foundations of Typography](#)
- [Buy Cheap Lynda.com - CSS Formatting Visual Data](#)
- [Buy OEM Adobe SpeedGrade CC MAC \(Full LifeTime License\)](#)
- [Buy Cheap Lynda.com - Excel 2013 Power Shortcuts](#)
- [Buy Cakewalk Sonar 7 Producer Edition \(en\)](#)
- [Buy OEM Microsoft Office 2004 Student and Teacher Edition MAC](#)
- [Download Autodesk AutoCAD P&ID 2014 \(32-bit\)](#)
- [Buy Microsoft Office Access 2010 with SP1 \(32-bit & 64-bit\)](#)

[\(cs,da,de,en,es,fi,fr,he,hu,it,ja,ko,nb,nl,pl,pt,ru,sv,tr,ar,bg,el,et,hi,kk,lt,lv,ro,sk,sl,sr,th,uk\)](#)



When attending a detective spoof with the title *Red Herring*, you probably shouldn't expect its storyline(s) to hold together in a way that makes much sense, and Michael Hollinger's farcical *noir* seems particularly all-over-the-map; somehow, in 130 minutes, the play's author squeezes in adultery, bigamy, murder, treason, neutron-bomb testing, the McCarthy hearings, a show-tune-loving Soviet, and a top-secret microfilm stashed in a block of Velveeta.

Yet for a master class on the art of turning an unwieldy script into an inventive, buoyant entertainment, I guide you to the Timber Lake Playhouse's current offering, in which director Derek Bertelsen and a spirited six-person cast are mining gold from somewhat tinny material. To be fair, despite its random bum jokes and paper-thin characters and a presentational structure more suited to film or television than theatre, *Red Herring* isn't *that* bad; many of its comic gambits, in truth, are terrific. Watching Timber Lake's latest, though, it becomes readily apparent that your laughter isn't being inspired by Hollinger's comedy so much as the directorial and performance-based imagination behind it – those bursts of eccentricity, personality, and stage smarts that you doubt are on the page but that you quickly discover this show couldn't, or at least *shouldn't*, do without.

Commie Dearest: "Red Herring," at the Timber Lake Playhouse through July 24

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 18 July 2011 06:00

Your tip-off that the production will likely play better than it's written actually comes, oddly enough, during its first scene change. Set in the fall of 1952, *Red Herring* opens with some comically hard-boiled repartee and romantic banter between detective Maggie Pelletier (Katie Wesler) and G-man Frank Keller (Dryden Meints), whose discussion of marriage is interrupted by news of a corpse found off the shore of Boston Harbor. The setting then shifts to the site of the presumed murder, but before we reach the harbor's docks (an impressive piece of Anthony Luetkenhaus scenic design), our attention is diverted to Pelletier, illuminated from stage right, who is wordlessly readying herself for the investigation, primping her wardrobe and practicing her sexy-and-steely-career-gal composure.



Lasting only a dozen or so seconds, it's really an unimportant moment in the scheme of things. But with your gaze fixed on Wesler, with her subtle, charming demonstration of Pelletier's confidence – and with your ears tickled by the first of many cleverly appropriated songs and TV and radio spots of the period, courtesy of sound designer Patrick Bley – you realize that you barely paid any attention to the momentum-stalling scene shift itself. This practice of having characters perform bits of solitary (and oftentimes funny) business during locale changes takes place during every such segue in *Red Herring*, and it proves to be an essential and most welcome directorial choice on Bertelsen's part, because heaven knows there are a *lo-o-ot* of locale changes to contend with.

Beyond the exploits of our heroic detectives, two other major plotlines fight for space here. In one, a pair of endearing, newly engaged nerds – Andrew Harth's James and Julia Mitchell's Lynn – find their relationship under duress, as he's an Army officer acting as a spy for the Russians, and she's the daughter of Communist-loathing Senator Joe McCarthy. In the other, randy landlady Mrs. Kravitz (Kelsey Andres) conducts an affair with Soviet spy Andrei Borchevsky (Brandon Ford), a relationship compromised by his six-year marriage and the facts behind her recently *ended* marriage. And through it all, with everyone but Wesler cast in more than one role, more than a dozen additional supporting goons pop up in *Red Herring*, while Hollinger's script whisks us everywhere from a coroner's office in Massachusetts to a family room in Wisconsin to – for one literally incendiary sequence – the middle of the South Pacific.

As these individually amusing narrative detours eventually dovetail, it all proves a bit too much, and while many of the playwright's satirical imaginings are sharp – that McCarthy angle is a

Commie Dearest: "Red Herring," at the Timber Lake Playhouse through July 24

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 18 July 2011 06:00

hugely satisfying piece of historical revisionism – a few too many of its gags aren't. (Two of Andres' bawdy characters deliver practically the same limp joke about their husbands' deficiencies in the sack.) Yet while its comedic conceits and punchlines are occasionally wanting, Bertelsen's staging and pacing rarely are. He does expert work with the play's pratfalls and rapid-fire dialogue exchanges – the exactingly timed overseas call between James and Lynn is especially flooring – and delivers an oft-repeated comic motif that I cackled at every time it was employed: Whenever set pieces are rolled on-stage, characters will continually, unexpectedly appear from *behind* them, as if they'd just spent time in the scenery's basement. (In the best of these sequences, Harth – portraying an unflappable bartender on Halloween night – keeps popping up wearing a different hat. His sombrero and Pope chapeau, I thought, were particularly stylish.) Plus, as has been a given at Timber Lake this summer, Bertelsen has access to a rather spectacular assemblage of actors in *Red Herring*, all of whom lend the piece polish and originality.



Confident, conspicuously attractive, and able to toss off Raymond Chandler-esque *bon mots* with offhanded wit, Wesler is a dream of a period lead – Barbara Stanwyck by way of Jack Webb – and Meints partners her with wonderfully square-jawed dry-comic appeal. (He's never more amusing, though, than when Keller *loses* his calm; Meints' drunken revenge on a bridal-shop mannequin is a sight to behold.) After her tough-cookie frankness and enjoyably exaggerated accents in *Fight of the Lawnchair Man* and *Sweet Charity*, Mitchell's sweetly riotous turn as McCarthy's numbskull daughter feels revelatory, although fellow fans of the performer's previous, outsize Timber Lake characters needn't fret; she also shows up as a slow-moving, ball-busting city clerk. (This civil servant begins searching for Keller's marriage-license application under the "A"s, and will get to the "K"s when she's good and ready, damn it.) Harth, meanwhile, is a marvel. Audiences can argue over whether the man is more hysterical as his painfully simpleminded spy or his drawling, torpid, chain-smoking coroner who uses the toes of cadavers to hold his cigarettes, but there's no point, really. No one's wrong in that fight.

Even though, in one of the show's few awkward touches, Andres has been directed to present most of her punchlines face-front to the crowd in the manner of an old-timey melodrama, the lead dancer of *Sweet Charity*'s miraculous "Rich Man's Frug" appears just as graceful a comic performer; her breathless, air-headed readings as Mrs. Joe McCarthy are especially riotous.

Commie Dearest: "Red Herring," at the Timber Lake Playhouse through July 24

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 18 July 2011 06:00

And the chameleon-like Ford, devastatingly funny while slurping vodka from a spoon, adds to the wild enjoyment he provides as Andrei with his turns as an excitable FBI assistant and the ancient, tortoise-like husband of Andres' bridal-shop proprietor, who's 105 if he's a day. It's hard to imagine Timber Lake's farce being better cast, and every time R
ed Herring

's narrative and more obvious routines threaten to hobble the fun, Bertelsen and his performers bring it back to sensational, sometimes startlingly unpredictable life. At one point during Thursday's performance, out of absolutely nowhere, Andrei performed a cartwheel and then a *backflip*

, and then – to the audience's thunderous applause – landed with outstretched arms and a triumphant smile. And here I was beginning to think there was maybe something Brandon Ford *couldn't* do.

For tickets and information, call (815)244-2035 or visit TimberLakePlayhouse.org .