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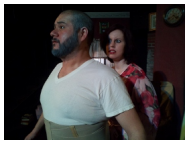
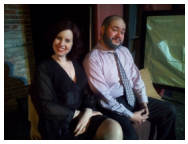


The District Theatre's production of *Scenery* boasts the most range I've yet seen from actor Ed Villarreal, who is obviously growing as an artist after notable performances in the (then-) Harrison Hilltop Theatre's *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* last year, and New Ground Theatre's *Bad Habits* last month. During Thursday night's show, he incorporated an accent, plus shifts in vocal inflection and projection, to punctuate either the humor or emotion of his lines, and in so doing, successfully shaped his Richard as an aging actor resigned to his status.

Villarreal's performance would perhaps be even more remarkable were he working with better material. Playwright Ed Dixon's script isn't bad, but it often struck me, while watching the play, that some of the lines were meant to be more clever than they actually are. The audience's laughs were few and far between, although it should be said that the laughs that *were* elicited by Dixon's words and director James Fairchild's cast were hearty ones. In his story of two married actors on the opening night of their latest play, Dixon manages to sneak in some fairly witty double entendres and innuendo – jokes that take a bit of time to sink in before they're understood. In particular, there's a line about Richard not being able to go down on a ship that, in the context of the conversation, could almost be taken literally, yet the sexual joke is masked just enough to render it funnier for not being so blatant.

It’s unfortunate that Dixon’s work is good rather than great, as the material he’s working with is rife with comedic potential. In *Scenery*, we’re privy to discussions between Villarreal’s Richard and Molly McLaughlin’s Marion as the performers prepare themselves for the curtain, freshen up during intermission, and ready themselves for the opening-night party. The entire play takes place in their shared, backstage dressing room, and through their conversations, we learn that Richard is gay, but that he and Marion are married for business purposes, which has served them well in their stage careers.

While Richard appears blasé about being an older actor, Marion seems bothered that she’s no longer an ingénue – not even an *aging* ingénue – and the humor of the piece comes from their talk of acting superstitions (saying “Macbeth” aloud or having peacock feathers backstage), reviewers (who, we're told, tend to hate two-personplays nearly as much as *one*-person plays), and audiences who routinely cough, unwrap candy, talk on cell phones, and excuse themselves to use the bathroom. Consequently, many of *Scenery*'s jokes, which are maybe best understood by people who’ve worked in theatre, are a bit too inside, and oftentimes fall a bit flat.



For her part, perhaps due to opening-night nerves (and/or knowing there were reviewers in the audience), McLaughlin didn’t allow her performance on Thursday to breathe. She nailed every line right on cue, but that actually *created* the problem; every sentence followed its cue too quickly, with McLaughlin not pausing, or allowing for emotional beats, while her character thought of what to say next. With the show running an hour and 15 minutes, including the intermission, the pacing was quick and steady, but could have used some emotion-driven variety.

It also could have used some more interesting movement. Despite the inherent staging limitations in two-person plays – and that fact that *Scenery*'s characters don't actually do much beyond talk – Fairchild too often has his actors sitting in chairs at their dressing tables, or standing *behind* those chairs, or

sitting together on a couch; the action does occasionally pick up, particularly in Act II, but the piece would benefit greatly from more physicality. It is worth noting, however, that Fairchild gives Villarreal's Richard some amusing things to do at his dressing table, including plucking his eyebrows and trimming his nose hair. Perhaps that's the key to improving this play, or any of those critic-unfriendly two-person plays: more manscaping.

Scenery *plays at the District Theatre (1611 Second Avenue, Rock Island) through February 25. For tickets and information, call (309)235-1654 or visit DistrictTheatre.com .*