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Local Arts Reviews BY WAYNE ALAN BRENNER



WOMEN WHO STEAL: Crime and Fun-ishment

State Theater, through June 19

There *are* people who won't go to see theatre because they're afraid of being disappointed -- and not just because they'll have wasted their money. I know some people like that; and with a smidgen of extrapolation I'm one of those folks myself. We don't want to spend the energy to see something that's poorly done, as might happen, nor do we want to see something so experimental that its *raison d'être* is irrelevant to all but a tight cabal of wonky undergrads. Especially since we can always watch television for free instead, right?

Most TV is disappointing and hardly worthy of one's time, too, sure; but then, so is most of everything. TV viewing requires so little effort, and we can always wait around for the next *Seinfeld*, the next Golden Age of *The Simpsons*, the next *Barney Miller*-quality comedy, right? Well, we *can* wait around for that ... until theatre of a similar verve and quality, or better, comes along and some reviewer says, "Put down those remotes, people -- you've *got* to see this."

Such is the case with *Women Who Steal*.

Carter W. Lewis' new play introduces us to Peggy and Karen, the latter of whom has recently committed, as they say, adultery with the former's husband. *Women Who Steal* is about the aftermath of that revelation, and it's a hilarious, tightly constructed joy ride, complete with squealing tires and tequila-chugging and Meat Loaf -- yes: Meat *Loaf!* -- blaring from the car radio. How these women deal with each other as they attempt to resolve the resultant conflict and stress, how they interact with the different men in their lives, is played out in a story that reaches the fullness of its comedic potential without losing sight of the serious emotions that fuel the action. Lewis' writing is marvelously structured to make the best use of the situation; though there are a few disposable jokes -- which *are* funny, after all -- this weaving of circumstance and consequence is beyond clever the way concrete is beyond Styrofoam.

As for the reluctant theatregoer's worry of poor performances? Forget about it. These are all Equity actors here. And while one might not be able to say Equity = professional brilliance necessarily, this State Theater Company production could make a case for that equation. Babs George's Karen and Jill Parker-Jones' Peggy are people so convincingly portrayed, it takes the slight irreality of the dialogue and plot to remind you that *this is theatre*. Karen is a single, brainy beauty who, approaching the Calamitous Age of Forty, is befuddled almost to ditziness by her own intellect; George captures her with strategically puzzled looks and mile-a-minute rationalizations. Peggy is a plainjane and married half-centurion, tenacious and resourceful as the IRS of love but prone to unfettered, emotion-driven response; Parker-Jones unreels her like Carol

Burnett on a tear. (And you wouldn't want either of these characters, in their current crisis, to have a shotgun, would you? Uh oh: They have a shotgun.) Steve Shearer appears as the various men: the waiter, the old flame, the current infatuation, the cheating husband. It works well, the way this actor, recurring, reduces the men toward one Man -- which archetype Karen and Peggy spend much time joyously railing against. But it doesn't hurt at all that Shearer's fine skill makes each man a recognizable individual.

Nothing, in fact, hurts this show. Skip Greer's direction, the lighting and sound design, the projected scene-specific backdrops, the simplicity of the set -- a couple of chairs, a bench, and a table -- and *even the smooth efficiency of the players rearranging the set during scene changes*, for chrissakes, add to the show's success. This is what good theatre -- at least, good non-brooding mainstream theatre -- is all about. Listen: Put down those remotes, people -- you've *got* to see this.