

Women Who Steal

BY **IRIS BROOKS**, Austin Chronicle



Larry L. King Theatre at Austin Playhouse, through Sept. 30

The press photo for *Women Who Steal*, featuring two spunky-looking women, one brandishing a shotgun, with a male captive between them, does not inspire confidence. It immediately evokes a familiar host of derivative *Thelma & Louise*-style narratives of vaguely criminal, middle-aged female empowerment. The oppressively formulaic scenario – usually involving two friends, a car, and some sort of violent retribution leveled on a male of the species – has long ceased to be the shocking liberation of the female id that it originally laid claim to. Instead, it generally serves up a collection of predictable and banal observations on gender and the female experience. And while this particular variation on the theme contains many of the usual conventions and, at times, does veer dangerously close to being exactly that, the exceptionally clever script by Carter W. Lewis still manages to surprise, to offer a refreshing, if minor, inversion of the expected structure of the genre without sacrificing its guilty pleasures.

To begin with, the two protagonists are not friends but rather a deceived wife and the woman her husband slept with, a fact very amusingly introduced in the play's opening lines as Peggy, the wife, repeatedly interrupts a long philosophical monologue by Karen, her dinner companion, as she tries to ascertain just how many times this pontificator slept with her husband. As the play progresses and the two women embark on their odyssey of inebriation and subsequent descent into rambunctious middle-class anarchy, this model, of profound observation undercut by the quotidian, proves to be comic gold in the very able hands of the two leads.

This play is a tour de force for its two actresses; they are both onstage almost continuously for its duration, and Austin Playhouse is fortunate to be able to count among its company two comediennes as talented as Babs George and Mary Agen Cox. The first act belongs to George; her characterization of Karen, the beautiful, cynical, philosophically inclined other woman, is a marvel of surprising eccentricity and flawless timing. She manages to turn the stultifying act of waiting around for fish to bite into a hysterically dead-on study in intoxication. The astuteness with which Lewis captures the wandering rhythms of drunken conversation and the dexterity with which these ladies translate it is another delight of the production. Cox makes Peggy, the staid matron who discovers her inner Bonnie Parker, an excellent foil for Karen's brittle self-importance, and her wry commentary and down-to-earth outlook only become funnier as her actions become more outrageous. Huck Huckaby plays all of the male roles, and his well-meaning bafflement as he repeatedly finds himself surrounded by a maelstrom of female ire becomes increasingly endearing. He is so effectively harangued, assaulted, threatened, and mauled by the two women that by the play's end, the much-maligned men actually seem rather sympathetic, and it is the two ladies whose morality becomes suspect as their self-absorption leads them to greater and greater acts of violation – shootings, kidnappings, and locking innocent co-workers in the trunks of Mercedes, for example.

The tiny cast is well-directed by Lara Toner; they navigate the many scene changes fluidly, even giving the impression of riding in an invisible car with effectiveness. She shows great skill in handling the play's many

fluctuations in intensity, knowing when to let the comedy of the lines speak for itself and when to let the ladies give it all at full throttle. Her approach works well in the small Larry L. King Theatre; the intimacy of the space allows the actors and audience to feed off one another, that palpable exchange of energy being the engine that drives a successful comic performance.

The subject matter and its distinctly female preoccupations – male reticence, menopause, the occasional faked orgasm – appeal to a specific audience, and apparently they know who they are. At a performance on Sunday, were there not a stigma attached to similar behavior (or perhaps if there had just been room), the audience would have been quite literally rolling in the aisles. *Women Who Steal* is the first production of the Austin Playhouse season on the Larry L. King Theatre stage, and if it is any indication of the works to follow, 2007-2008 looks very promising.