



ONE SHOE OFF CONTINUES AT VLT.

Character Studies

Comedy at VLT, drama at Lord Leebrick.

What if Edward Albee's caustic classic *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* were aggressively softened into a warm and wacky farce? For the results, check out Tina Howe's *One Shoe Off*, currently playing at Very Little Theatre.

The play follows a disastrous evening in the decaying, plant-ridden home of Leonard (Lloyd Brass) and Dinah (Darcy Guhl), a married-too-long couple entertaining their pretentious new neighbors, Tate (the playful Alex Elkin) and Clio (Jessica Haverly), a children's book editor and actress, respectively. Naturally, nothing goes right and everyone ends up bored or angry. Many clever running gags ensue, such as the dual inabilities for anyone to actively carry on a conversation or remember anybody else's name.

Nobody really cares about spending the evening together. Leonard and Dinah invited the neighbors over because they felt like they had to, and Tate and Clio came out of obligation, not the desire to socialize. Watching the couples endure the horrors of this is quite fun.

Yet *One Shoe Off's* best moments are not gags or symbols, but careful dissections of character. Did Dinah cheat on Leonard? Will Leonard ever find work or calm down? But it often takes things too far, devolving into fits of inexplicable wackiness, such as Tate's penchant for reciting nursery rhymes as classical poetry or Dinah's continuous changes into crazy play costumes she designed. These tics are meant to show the characters' nervousness, but the straight approach is funnier.

Steve Mandell (Parker) is a fascinating and gifted comic actor. He shows great range, from pitch-black humor in one scene to heartbreaking pathos in another. Mandell's subtle, spacey facial expressions, slow deliberate movements, even the direction of his sightlines reveal much about his character.

Overall, the play is inviting and dryly funny with a fantastic (to say the least) set and a handful of good performances. It's cute, innocuous and thus not terribly thought-provoking. Directed by Suzanne Shapiro, *One Shoe Off* runs through June 14 at Very Little Theatre.

On the other end of town and the theatrical spectrum comes Lord Leebrick's production of Paula

Vogel's Pulitzer Prize winner *How I Learned to Drive*. The story, presented backward through the 1950s for full emotional impact, follows the sexual relationship of a young girl named Lil' Bit and her Uncle Peck.

On the surface, the play is about incest, but that would be far too simple. Vogel refuses to make it that easy. *How I Learned to Drive* analyzes the sexualization of children, the effects of alcoholism and the panic of adolescence. The thematic aim of the play just might be to deromanticize the 1950s, cars and teen sexuality.

Like Brecht, who wanted to motivate audiences to change social ills rather than become wrapped up in characters' emotions, Vogel makes it hard to neatly package Lil' Bit and Peck into Good or Evil archetypes. Peck is a predator, but he's human; disliking him is hard because he's handsome, seductive and, ironically, great with kids. And Lil' Bit is no damsel in distress. She's often cruel, difficult and a willing participant in the relationship.

The acting is among Eugene's finest in recent memory. As Lil' Bit and Peck, Jennifer Coombs and Stephen C. Speidel have a layered chemistry that can be both sweetly romantic and painfully repulsive. Both are able to pull off the tricky Brechtian acting approach, simultaneously performing their parts while also being detached.

Kim Bates is her usual brilliant self, particularly as Lil' Bit's fidgety, sexually repressed grandmother. Sharon Sless is at turns wounded and hilarious as Lil' Bit's mother and is both during her uproarious monologue on "How to Drink Like a Woman." Bill Reid plays creepy teenagers and creepy old men with equal aplomb.

Despite the uncomfortable subject matter, the production is a delight of the theatrical. The senses are assaulted with aesthetic pleasures, ranging from the road sign projections to a warm, misleading light scheme straight out of a musical. The raked set, resembling a highway off-ramp, does exactly what it should: suggest but not overpower while serving as a versatile canvas.

It's not for everyone, but if you like theater that makes you squirm a lil' bit, check out *How I Learned to Drive*. It plays at Lord Leebrick through June 28. **EW**

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Suzanne Shapiro, director

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