

The Price of Revenge

Very Little Theatre's *The Visit* proves relevant to 2006

The evening starts off with music, but even that ends ominously just before the production begins. A touch of hostility, a touch of theatrical violence and the discordance of those forced offstage appropriately introduce the Very Little Theatre's production of *The Visit*.

Written by Swiss playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt in the 1950s, a time when much of Europe attempted to sweep the horrors of World War II under a carpet of recovery and material goods, the play uses cruel humor to weave themes of revenge, blame and hypocrisy. The plot is simple: The town of Gullen (which, in Swiss German, means the town of shit) has fallen on hard times. Its factories have closed. The characters sit around a train station, marking time by the passage of trains that never stop in Gullen, bemoaning their poverty.

Suddenly, the Mayor (Ken Hof) rushes to rally his citizens, including shopkeeper Anton Schill (Dan Pegoda). Claire Zachanassian, Schill's old flame and the wealthiest woman in the world, is returning home, and everyone hopes she will end the grinding poverty.

Zachanassian (Sharon Wetterling) arrives unsettlingly early, with a retinue that includes her black-clad butler, Bobby (Bary Shaw, compelling in this role). She also brings two performing blind men, Kobby (Earl Ruttencrutter) and Lobby (Matt Keating), a

black panther ... and a coffin. Zachanassian promises two million in undefined currency to the town, and relief washes over the joyful inhabitants — until they hear her condition.

That condition involves revenge for Zachanassian and a sort of atonement for the town. Anton Schill, the genial, friendly shopkeeper, slated to be the next mayor of Gullen, provides Zachanassian with a target in her drive for what she calls justice. Gradually the townspeople, originally eager to stand with their friend, fall under the relentless appeal of assuaging their poverty with food, drink and material goods.

Pegoda is the focal point, and he inhabits his character thoroughly and convincingly, providing an entry into this near-fable. Wetterling's flat delivery weakens the play, but Stephen Speidel as the Pastor and Don Aday as the Teacher imbue their challenging roles with quiet strength.

At the end of the play, director James Aday would have done better to cut the action before the Greek chorus, which too heavily pounds home the message. Still, the play leaves the audience questioning its complicity in the sickeningly familiar pursuit of an eye for an eye, with no hope of forgiveness or redemption.

The Visit runs June 8-11, 15-18, 23 and 24. Log on to www.thevlt.com for more info or call 344-7751. **ew**

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