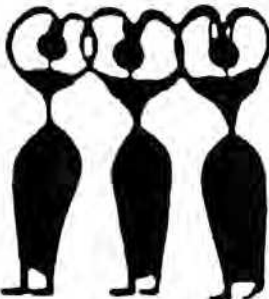


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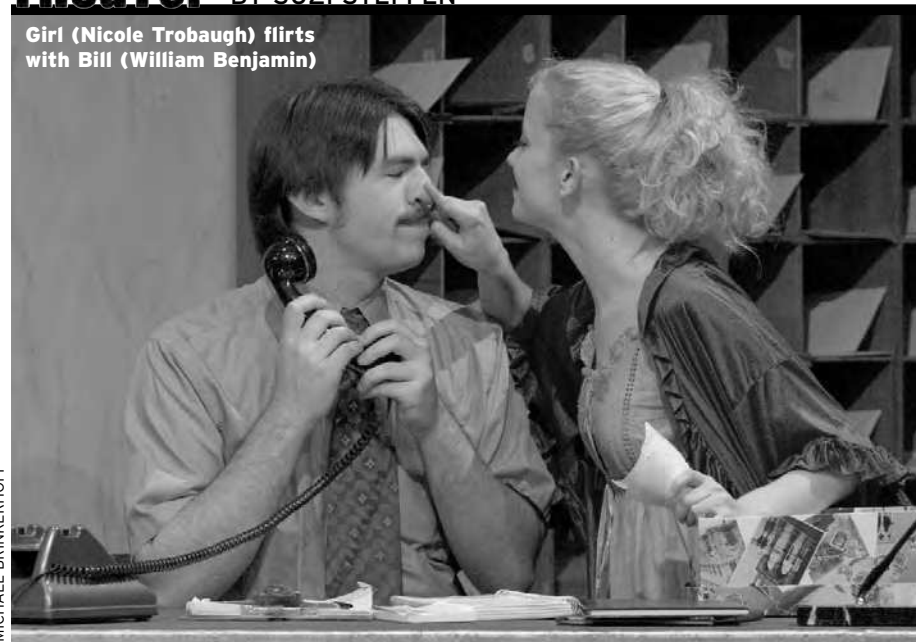


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THEATER BY SUZI STEFFEN

Girl (Nicole Trobaugh) flirts
with Bill (William Benjamin)



MICHAEL BRINKERHOFF

Everybody's Lookin'

Hot'L Baltimore and the search for home

Lanford Wilson's *Hot'L Baltimore*, now playing in LCC's Blue Door Theatre, deal with what several reviewers have called "racy" topics. It's a play about prostitutes, pimps, johns, elderly retirees and a lesbian. (Not to mention the pot-busted work-camp escapee former college student.) What's the world coming to?

Or rather, what *was* the world coming to? The play, first produced in 1973 and turned into a 1975 TV series, retains its power to shock, thanks to modern reactionary forces trying to keep the seedy side of life under wraps. Or perhaps it's actually thanks to the "middle-class-ification" of the U.S., where having awesome toys distracts us from the plight of those who can't afford to live in a nice house. But life, of course, is never perfectly clean, and Wilson's script breathes a frighteningly fresh breath of 1970s air into 2007, when sex is either glorified as a spiritually fulfilling joy or degraded as something to be denied and ignored. Still, no one would want lives like those of the people living in the condemned hotel, a once-glorious, now-derelect downtown property near the train station.

Trains and their whistles punctuate the play — or should: One character (whose name is simply "Girl" and is played by Nicole Trobaugh) often refers to specific trains, but for some reason, the usually capable LCC production team decided not to project whistles during the play. That would have helped Trobaugh make a bit more sense at times. Her tendency to speak all of her lines with the same mix of excitement and an odd innocence (given how Girl earns her living) means that important bits sometimes get swallowed. Girl's older peers, Suzy (Megan Lutsock) and April (a funny, vibrant Caitlin Jean Tischer), regard her with affection and alarm — as does the hotel's assistant manager, Bill (William Benjamin), with whom Girl flirts the way she breathes: with assurance, the raw power of youth, the wide-eyed look and long-limbed stumbling of a tall puppy.

This ensemble piece features Wilson's trademark overlapping dialogue, which can create a challenge for the audience. The actors occasionally find themselves distracted by this as well, but the student cast under the direction of Chris Pinto generally performs

with focus and aplomb. Retiree Millie, played with hardy skill by Hannah Mootz, gets most of the deadpan lines as her half-closed eyes and knowing smile mix with her leisure suits and clomping shoes to create a rounded picture of this woman of a certain age. Jackie (Maranda Burrell) seems more alarming for her fury at the world than for her sexual orientation, perhaps an indication of one of the ways in which U.S. society has advanced since 1973. In the climactic scene, Burrell's focused acting holds in check a wild group of the hotel manager (Matt Keating), an older resident (Parsa Naderi) and the too-spazzy Trobaugh.

Unfortunately, that scene comes in the second act, and the third act never quite gets off the ground. That's partly due to the script and partly due to blocking problems with a large scene when Suzy throws a good-bye party (she's moving into a pimp-provided apartment). Another climactic moment between the drifter Paul (Dylan Skye Kennedy, again with a pitch-perfect costume) and Girl doesn't really come off. But what the play does illustrate is the tenderness and impulsive generosity with which the various characters — socially isolated by circumstances or income — treat each other. Their dreams aren't coming true; they won't find what they're looking for, they know; but they can be kind to one another even as they slip into oblivion. Maybe that kindness is something all of us, privileged or not, can work on.

At least, wouldn't it be pretty to think so?

Hot'L Baltimore continues through May 19. Tix available at 463-5761.

In last week's review of *Mud*, I wrote that the UO theater department is "supported by a publicly funded structure that doesn't need to produce a profit in order to survive." I meant that staff and faculty have jobs that don't rely on ticket sales for funding, but there's more to the story. Joseph Gilg, a professor in the department, notes that "the university built and maintains the buildings that we perform in, [but] the budgets for all UT events are generated through ticket sales. In that way we are just the same as all of the other theatres in town — royalty, rental, scripts, sets, costumes, lights, special effects and promotion expenses are all paid with ticket income and donations."

EW