

Sinners and Saints

Iguana sizzles to close out VLT's 80th

Tennessee Williams is the patron saint of Southern-fried dysfunction. His best plays are hot and humid and existentially sweaty affairs, shot through with sexual misgivings and a profound weariness for a world swamped by its own excesses and transgressions. Neither fully tragic nor completely comic, Williams' characters inhabit small, hermetic hells of the distinctly domestic variety, and their claustrophobic dreams of escape usually send them scampering right onto the hot tin roof of madness.

The Night of the Iguana, running currently at the Very Little Theatre, is a loose-limbed samba around familiar themes: squandered lives, carnal pathos, and the halting, bumpy search for spiritual fulfillment. Bearing the burden of these existential themes is defrocked priest-turned-Mexican tour guide Larry Shannon (Steven Gott). As the play opens, Shannon, recently sober and at wit's end, pulls a busload of unsuspecting churchwomen into the run-down motel of Maxine Faulk (Tara Wibrew), a saucy, strong-willed woman with whom Shannon shares some history. Also crashing Maxine's hotel are Hannah Jelkes (Penta Swanson) and her grandfather Nonno (the excellent Richard Leinaweaver), a pair of penniless travelers who swap their art for accommodations.

The central conflict is the short, sharp battle of wills that occurs among Shannon, the mysterious Hannah and the recently widowed Maxine. If the story is small in scale, it nevertheless packs a sizable punch. And, unlike Williams' more memory-haunted works such as *Suddenly*, *Last Summer* and *The Glass Menagerie*, this play ends with a promise of salvation, however provisional.

Director James Aday keeps this *Iguana* tight and on course. From the snappy pacing to the economical direction, the play moves at a brisk clip without running roughshod over the lilting beauty

and bitchy banter of Williams' dialogue. The simple set, centered on a hammock strung between two wings of the hotel, is nicely self-contained, though it does give off a slight whiff of gringo-ized Mexican restaurant. Still, *Iguana* is a good-looking play and, for the most part, it manages to keep fond thoughts of Richard Burton, Deborah Kerr and Ava Gardner (from John Huston's 1964 movie) at bay.

This is not to say that VLT's adaptation doesn't have some pretty significant flaws, predominantly of the casting variety. First and foremost is the question of age — granted, a prickly and perhaps indelicate issue, but one essential to *Iguana*'s psychosexual dynamic. Swanson is fantastic as Hannah; she seems the one person on stage who truly grasps the wounded humanity fueling William's work, and her

performance is both nuanced and perfectly restrained. Unfortunately, Swanson is either too old for the part or — more likely — Gott and Wibrew are too young. As the hotel-owning vamp, Wibrew — talented but unseasoned — gives it her all, but she lacks that slightly bruised quality that makes Maxine the perfect foil to Shannon's "comfortable crucifixion." Wibrew is more petulant teenager than canny cougar. What's more, *Iguana* doesn't work unless Hannah and Maxine — both vying for Shannon's soul, in very different ways — are close in age. In more ways than one, Swanson and Wibrew are decades apart.

Neither is it believable that Gott's Shannon is suffering from the sort of despair and soul-rot that would drive him to sleep with a 17-year-old naïf or curse God as "a senile delinquent." The actor is far too jaunty in his one-dimensional delivery of the priest's downbeat dialogue, and he has a difficult time capturing the creeping terror of Shannon's existential heebie-jeebies. It's mostly a matter of tone. Though his performance picks up steam in the second act, Gott can't seem to overcome his timidity and bafflement in the face of William's scorched-earth script. There's no shame in this, really. *Iguana* is a demanding play, complex and tough to unpack. Tennessee Williams is always a wonder to behold, and the fact that VLT gets this late-career masterpiece half right is, in this instance, good enough. **EW**

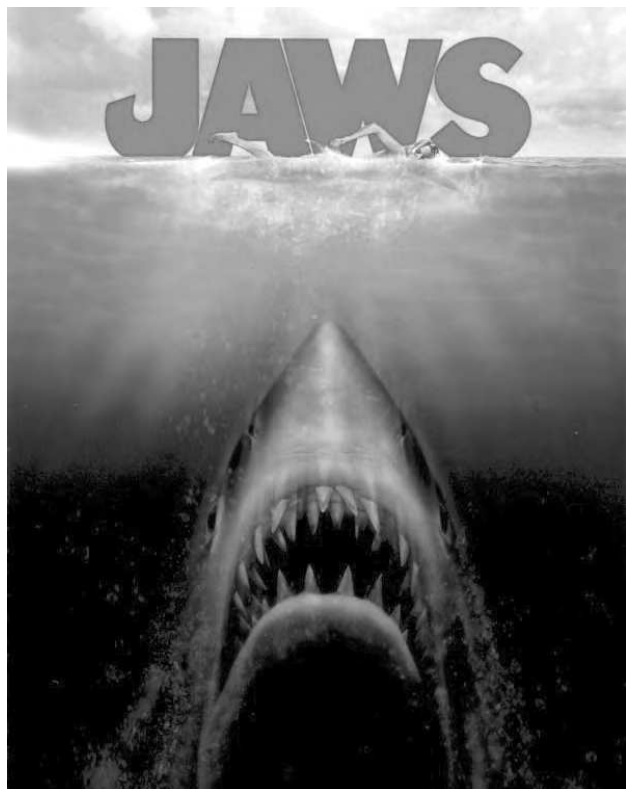
Night of the Iguana continues through Aug. 15 at the VLT. Tix at 344-7751.



Hannah (Penta Swanson), Maxine (Tara Wibrew) and Pedro (Edgar Julian Caballero) tie up Shannon (Steve Gott)

RICH SCHELAND

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