

Bernie (Chris Pinto), Frank (Bill Campbell) and Georgie (Leslie Murray)



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Optimist, Meet Realist

Odets' *The Country Girl* at the Very Little Theatre

An alcoholic actor "rescued" by an idealistic director and the actor's wife, a realist with a loyal streak a mile wide. Does the actor deserve rescuing?

In the Very Little Theatre's strong production of Clifford Odets' *The Country Girl*, the reason audience members think washed-up actor Frank Elgin (Bill Campbell) should luck into anything good stems directly from the sympathetic, understated portrait Campbell paints for his reprehensible character. Frank's a likeable guy who just needs a break, just one more chance. Or so we think.

Bernie Dodd (Chris Pinto, in another quite strong performance) gives him that chance,

the opportunity to read for a large role in a new play written by a young playwright (Tom Wilson). As a kid, Bernie saw Frank in a couple of plays and has never forgotten his skills. Now, after years in which Frank's decline and fall left a thudding silence in the theater world, Bernie thinks it's time for resurrection.

What effect will that have on his wife? Leslie Murray plays the titular role, Georgie Elgin, who gradually emerges in the script as the central character. Murray's a good actor; her work in *Rumors*, for instance, was an enjoyable combination of generous and kooky. But her Georgie doesn't have the glimpses of tenderness and sharp wit that the

character needs to convince the audience of the second act's plot twist. I'm willing to bet that most of the VLT's subscribers have seen the 1954 Bing Crosby/Grace Kelly/William Holden movie, but that twist still sent gasps rippling through the audience.

Odets, licking his wounds back in NY after hating a stint as a screenwriter in LA, needed a hit with *The Country Girl*. He directed the play when it opened, and he got his hit (which ironically was made into that 1954 movie). Wilson puts in a fine, steady, touching turn as writer Paul; Leela Gouveia skewers her ingenue role in *Rumors* with a delightful portrayal of Nancy; and Mark Mullaney's sweet, harried stage manager Larry represents an excellent breed. But the central action revolves around the triangle of Frank, Georgie and Bernie.

Campbell must deal with more stage business than any actor should have to. He doesn't make a show of it, but approximately every 10 seconds, Frank seems to be changing shirts, retying his ties or tying a fresh one without looking in the mirror, buttoning cuffs, tucking in shirttails and more. Part of that stems from the settings; about half of the play takes place in Frank's dressing rooms, one in Boston and one in NY.

Yes, he gets the part. (That happens early; I'm not spoiling you.) But can he hold onto it? Can he take the pressure? Will he start drinking and wreck his own chances? I'd like to see the play again just to notice more closely the masterful way Frank — and Campbell as Frank — deals with Bernie, who claims to be practical but whose idealism

shows up both as determination with Frank and bitterness toward his ex-wife.

Bernie's hostility and fury at women in general emerge in a key scene early in the second act, as Frank's acting starts to fall apart on and offstage, while Georgie spends her time in his dressing room, trying to pick up after him and keep him sober. Murray needs to match her pacing to Pinto's in that scene. Georgie's frustration, her long years of devotion to someone who doesn't deserve her, her desire for some kind of life of her own, should make her the character with whom the audience most identifies. She's difficult, prickly, brilliant, completely underutilized in life, and Murray needs to make Georgie ever so slightly more sympathetic, especially because Campbell's Frank earns audience affection early in the play.

The Country Girl, along with its focus on theater, has a proto-feminist bent. Who's Georgie when she's not with Frank? Will she ever find out? She asks the universe for a room of her own but seems locked in a struggle not only against herself (and Frank) but against a world that expects her to "be a home" to some man or other. Odets leaves her future open, uncertain, even as Frank finds temporary redemption and Bernie temporary success. What will happen to Georgie? Figure out what you think sometime in the next two weekends at the VLT. **EW**

The Country Girl runs through Jan. 30. Tix at 541-344-7751. Read an interview with director Chris McVay, which goes into much more detail about J Thibau's remarkable set, Bill Campbell's essential kindness, Frank's cruelty and more, on EW! A Blog.