



JAMES ADAY, LLOYD BRASS AND PAUL RHODEN

FAMILY DRAMA

The Very Little Theatre presents The Cleaning Man: A Deposition in the Estate of Rock Hudson

Rock Hudson: tall, handsome, ruggedly macho, gay. Following his death from AIDS in 1985 was a sensational media circus lawsuit: Scorned lover Marc Christian was demanding \$14 million, claiming it was owed to him as he had been unwittingly infected with the disease. Within this spectacular story, *The Cleaning Man* turns the spotlight on a fine-print footnote to history. John Dobbs, vain and simple, found employment and self-importance cleaning Hudson's house. Unexpectedly, Dobbs becomes pivotal to the trial and this play, as a dyad of brilliant lawyers smell weakness and circle in, firing accusations of betrayal, prostitution and cupidity.

Michael Holmes, a LA theater director and friend of Dobbs, created the play. With the exception of a brief prologue and epilogue, it is taken directly from court transcripts of the deposition of John Dobbs. I dropped in on Director Richard Leinaweaver and his

cast to hear about the challenge of taking what is essentially a court document and bringing it to life with actors, movement and emotion.

Paul Rhoden is up for perhaps the biggest challenge: playing his own father. "This was on my super-short list of things I wanted to do in my life," he says, "a chance to honor my father's memory." A local actor and schoolteacher, Rhoden was in his early 20s when his father tried the case of his lifetime, what was known then as the "Rock Hudson AIDS case." Following the case, Harold Rhoden was at the top of his career when he died tragically in a plane crash.

"If there's an antagonist in this play," Rhoden says, "it's my father." Representing the interest of Marc Christian, Harold Rhoden was, Rhoden notes, "a very good lawyer," implying that his other traits as an upstanding gentleman and father will not be present on stage in this play. While Rhoden expressed regret that Eugene audiences will only see the hardball attorney in his father, he says, "There is no sadness. I can almost hear him saying, 'Play me as I was.'"

Rhoden and his father were close but not similar. Still, it's a role he seems to be taking on with agility. "The more I say the lines, the more I argue the way he argues ... it's like I'm not imitating him, I am him." Rhoden smiles sheepishly, saying in a very non-Eugene way, "I don't know anything about channeling, but this might be it ... This is the most profound experience I've had as an actor."

Rhoden is not the only cast member with a unique acting challenge. Lloyd Brass is called to present the nervous, insecure, 'tour de fool' of John Dobbs, Hudson's cleaning man. Brass slipped in quietly for the interview in a bad wig, one foot already in his character. "I'm getting impressions of the character from the language," Lloyd says, "He has no full sentences ... he is outraged; he says this a lot, 'I am outraged.'" Lloyd is plucking a fastidiousness and fragile pride out of Dobbs, describing how the cleaning man wore a wig to cover up the scars from a facelift, and would use cosmetic tape to lift his sagging jowls. Brass spoke lovingly of the little dog that Dobbs used to carry in a bag over his right shoulder, while he had cleaning supplies in a bag over his left shoulder. Leinaweaver looks warily at Lloyd, and then at me, saying, "We may or may not have a dog on stage. We're working on that."

This play is ultimately about the confusion and anger of the early AIDS epidemic. Leinaweaver hopes the audience will take from this experience a reminder: He notes that while our understanding of AIDS has grown dramatically since the 1980s, people are still dying of the disease, and it is on the rise among young Americans and people of color. "We've come so far," Leinaweaver says, "but we've forgotten so much."

The Cleaning Man: A Deposition in the Estate of Rock Hudson runs April 26-28 and May 2-5 at The Very Little Theatre's Stage Left; \$10.

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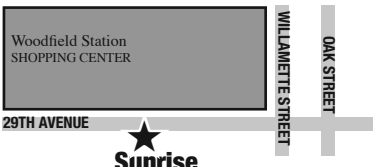
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