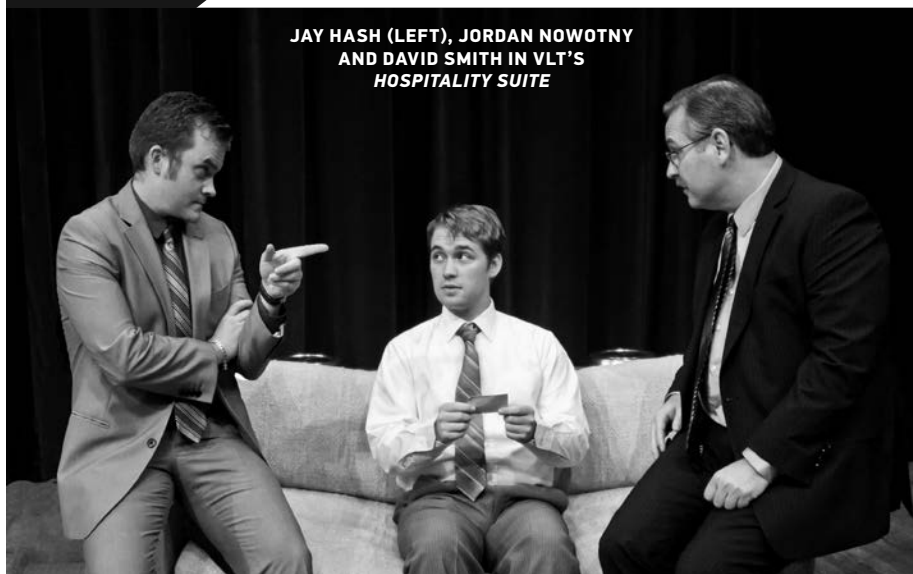




LUBE JOB

VLT examines the lives of oily salesmen in *Hospitality Suite*

Bob, Phil and Larry are in the existential hell that is the 26th-floor suite of a Holiday Inn overlooking Wichita, Kansas. Their JCPenney grey suits and their hopes of selling industrial lubricant set the prosaic scene for this morality tale.

Playwright Roger Rueff traps his characters in a prison of middling commerce, delivering a bleak look into their lives. Yet the soul of the salesman has been so masterfully covered by Arthur Miller, David Mamet and others that *Hospitality Suite* is in the unfortunate position of trying to push the dramatic boundaries farther. And it doesn't push hard enough.

Rueff provides his audience with a few interesting characters but doesn't give us any new ideas to munch on. I can appreciate themes of trust and honesty, as well as the idea that if you sell lubricant long enough with another man you will come to love him, but I knew all that before I sat down to watch the play.

Which leaves this production largely dependent on character, and that is where we find its strength.

I have been fortunate to see David Smith in a number of VLT productions over the past few years, and his work here as Phil represents a significant breakthrough. As the aging, divorcing, recovering, questioning former sales whiz, Smith delivers a moving performance.

Jordan Nowotny does his best with Bob, a proselytizing Baptist from the research team who's been sent along to lend authenticity to the sales venture. The playwright grants Bob only two dimensions, but Nowotny parlays that into a believable nube whose sweetness oozes with an unappetizing form of smug self-assurance.

Jay Hash as Larry is far and away the most interesting character. Honest and blunt to a fault, and spouting an endless stream of male sexual metaphors, Hash highlights the best of the script's language.

Paul Rhoden sneaks in for a clever cameo as the last drunk salesman to stumble out of the suite.

Nancy Boyett's direction elevates this flawed script. She pulls her actors through the more mundane elements and elegantly heightens the play's dramatic moments with some brilliantly layered arguments. What could have been just the noise of angry men becomes moments of heart-wrenching beauty.

Rueff asks his audience to search for meaning in this wilderness of buying and selling, but he's too conservative with his ideas to make that satisfying. Boyett and her cast mine this meaning for us in a moving, worthwhile production. ■

Hospitality Suite plays at the Very Little Theatre through Sunday, Dec. 14; \$10, 344-7751.

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