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Theater Review Setting, strong performance boost 'Dial M for Murder' at Brumder Mansion



John Karpinsky Randall T. Anderson (left) and Michael Guthrie perform in Triumvirate Theatricals production of Dial M for Murder at Milwaukee's Brumder Mansion.

By Mike Fischer, Special to the Journal Sentinel Aug. 23, 2014 12:50 p.m.

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Asked about the secret to adapting "Dial M for Murder" — the wildly successful play that became the first of three movies he'd make with Grace Kelly — Alfred Hitchcock insisted that one simply shoots such a script rather than opening it out.

The resulting sense of claustrophobia is even more apparent when "Dial M" unfolds on the small stage in the Brumder Mansion basement, where a just-opened production by Triumvirate Theatricals showcases another strong performance from Randall T. Anderson, fresh from his triumph as the lead in Off the Wall Theatre's production of "Rope."

In "Rope" — another theatrical thriller that Hitchcock later adapted — Anderson played the haunted good guy. Here, he plays the haunted bad guy: Tony, a recently retired tennis star who concocts a seemingly foolproof plan to murder his adulterous wife (Emily Craig) and inherit her fortune.

Ostensibly prim and proper, Anderson's nervy and on-edge Tony isn't nearly as suave and smooth as Ray Milland's cinematic version, which makes this Tony less charming snake than snakebit human. Some examples:

Much as this Tony may look forward to inheriting Margot's stash, he's also more obviously upset about Margot's affair; describing what it's like to see his wife in love with another man, Anderson's Tony starts with a dismissive sneer before becoming nearly wistful — and looking a bit lost.

Hearing Margot and her lover (Thomas Jacobsen) giggling in the next room, Anderson gives a furtive sideways glance — as though Tony can't even admit to himself how much it bothers him, despite being alone in an empty room.

Licking his wounds and true to the competitive athlete he once was, Anderson's Tony overcompensates by taking exuberantly jaunty pleasure in toying with his designated henchman: the down and out Captain Lesgate (Michael Guthrie).

There's clearly little pleasure left in the marriage between this Tony and Margot, played by Craig as tougher than Kelly's version — a point driven home with particular force in the well-staged murder scene, which unfolds in the flickering strobe light of a raging storm while using all of the Brumder's stage.

Nervously plucking at a wedding ring she'd like to lose and giving line readings on the state of her marriage conveying anger and despair, Craig is less happy housewife than trapped animal, desperate to be free from the 1950s hell in which she finds herself.

That's an interesting read. It would have been still more compelling if Craig hadn't been so tentative with her playmates — an affliction gripping each of the cast members surrounding Anderson, slowing the pace and slackening the tension in a piece that needs to be as taut as a high-strung wire.

It doesn't help that Robert A. Zimmerman — a warm actor better suited to comedy, and who also directs here — is miscast as the wily Inspector Hubbard. Madly scribbling notes, this Hubbard comes across as overly eager and insufficiently observant, which makes one wonder how he ever wins his match with Tony.

Nobody outmatches Anderson; he's the best reason to see this show.

IF YOU GO "Dial M for Murder" continues through Aug. 31 at the Brumder Mansion, 3046 W. Wisconsin Ave. For tickets, visit milwaukeeentertainmentgroup.com.

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