

Convincing characters make thriller success

By HELEN ZUCKER

Review

Don't wait to get tickets to The Birmingham Village Players' production of "Wait Until Dark." The scary, suspense-filled drama by Frederick Knott is in good hands at The Playhouse on Hunter and Chestnut. The production can be seen on Friday and Saturday.

Don Jackson as Mike Talman, the con artist who stops short of killing, is not only believable, but likeable. He's the man who has somehow fudged everything, who has never really gotten a handle on a solid trade.

He lives off his wits and what wits he has. The viewer gets the feeling that Talman is a man who could have run a corporation if he had edged into the mainstream instead of hobnobbing around with society's dregs.

Jackson doesn't miss a beat nor does he forget any of the considerable amount of dialogue.

Jim August is adroit as Sgt. Carlino, Talman's con artist sidekick. August's Carlino is a cruder version of the man who lives on society's fringes, who gets by on shady deals, fast shuffles, and dubious "jobs." He's quicker with brass knuckles and slower on thought, but very good at following orders.

August and Jackson play off each other nicely. The first time the two hoods meet again, having both been in jail, they circle each other warily, suspicious of each other, of the phone call that has summoned them both to the Greenwich Village basement apartment, of the world in general. But they quickly establish rapport. They understand the "rules" of the underground society they live in. They try to help each other out of the nasty spot Harry Roat puts them in.

JOHN UNRUH is creepy as Harry Roat, Jr. and Sr. He speaks in a fluty, sadistic whine. When Unruh demands that all weapons be thrown on the table, then flicks open his own switchblade, "Geraldine," and announces proudly: "I cannot negotiate in an atmosphere of mistrust," a shiver runs through the audience. Unruh creates a horrifying portrait of a sicko—a man with no conscience at all. In his search for the missing doll (the "MacGuffin" of the play, the thing everyone is looking for), Unruh's Harry Roat is a man who will stop at nothing.

He murders, sets fires, terrorizes everyone he comes near, and is stopped finally by the plucky intelligence of a blind girl—something he has not figured on.

The scariest scene (as in the movie version starring Audrey Hepburn), is the one in which Roat,

stabbed by the blind girl in the dark, crawls across the floor, and, literally rising from the dead—grabs at the girl's ankle. The audience, on opening night, rose in their seats, and screamed for a minute.

LYNNE MARTHEY as Susy Hendrix is wonderful. She's fresh, and believably in love with her husband, who will not let her be crippled by her blindness. The closing line of the play, "She can manage," is an understatement.

Trapped in the apartment with two petty thieves and a murderer, Ms. Marthey creates a Susy who rises to an incredible occasion. The girl uses every sense she has to its fullest, and in the process befriends a hostile teen-ager and turns her into a helpful ally.

Jayne Lowman as Gloria, the hard little twerp who lives upstairs, turns in a fine, sharp-edged performance. She looks a bit older than 12, but not much, and her gestures are so right, her observations so true to the quick observations of an intelligent, slightly-sour, bounced-around teen-ager that she fairly takes your breath away.

Ms. Lowman gives us a Gloria who resents everyone but her hero, Sam; who is vulnerable beneath the wisecracks; who is exactly the sort of kid who would give her all in a real adventure; who would wait all night in the Port Authority bus station if necessary, who emerges as an okay kid despite her looney parents.

Larry Sweet is fine as Sam Hendrix, the husband who loves his Susy enough to make her work hard at being "super blind." Even he seems stunned at his success when he arrives with the police at the final mopping up.

Skip Polak and John Reddy as the cops who come on in Keystone style are believable members of "New York's Finest."

The set by Ann Bellinson is terrific. It looks like a basement apartment belonging to a photographer, work bench, cracks in the wall and kitchenette.

The props by Helen Gibser and Joan Reddy are equally good.

Sound by Larry Sweet is fine. And the lights, handled by Linda and Dick Wright and Barbara (play) were dandy.

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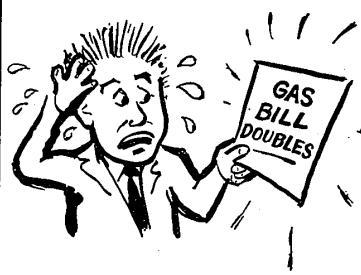


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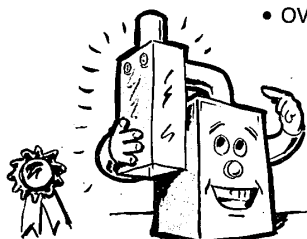
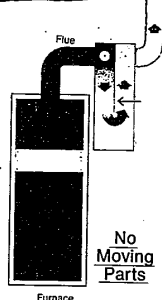
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