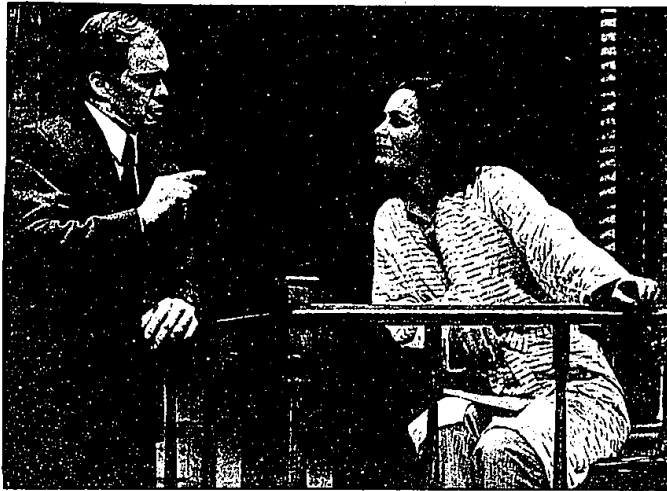


Courtroom drama 'Nuts' has a lot of punch



The prosecutor, Franklin Macmillan (Dave Florek), questions Claudia Faith Draper (Giulia Pagano) in the courtroom of the psychiatric wing at Bellevue

Hospital in the drama "Nuts" at the Birmingham Theatre.

Performances of the Birmingham Theatre production of "Nuts," drama by Tom Topor, continue through Feb. 6. Ticket prices range from \$11-\$18. For further information call the box office at 644-3533.

By Helen Zucker
special writer

Anyone who misses Tom Topor's "Nuts" at the Birmingham Theatre is nuts. Topor's script, despite a few loop-holes, beats the play "Tally's Folly" and the movie "The Verdict" (both currently in town) by miles. For sheer believability, punch, wit for the heart-breaking, knotty, real issues it raises, "Nuts" is the best script around. It should've won the Tony Award.

Cleanly directed by Stephen Zucker-man, this production hasn't got a moment of waste or busywork in it. The pacing is so good, in fact, that the only objection I have is the two intermissions. One would be sufficient. The two scenes that end Act I and II both end on such a climactic high that I didn't really want 10 minutes to break the mood. I'd have been happy to watch this work climb to its inevitable peak without any break at all.

It's a swift, clear novella of a play filled with wonderful, canny dialogue. It's old material, the "nice, ordinary people" from Mt. Kisco, Westchester, with a daughter in Bellevue, but Topor has wrung something new from a family saga we are all familiar with and don't speak about, and his play has a sharp, naturalistic edge that I have missed seeing for too long.

A CAST OF fine actors flesh out the surprising script, and the result is the

review

kind of theater of which we don't get enough. I want to congratulate Birmingham Theatre for putting this play on the boards. I haven't seen anything this good here since "Elephant Man."

Richard Zobel as Aaron Levinaky, the defense attorney, is superb. And William Cain as Arthur Kirk, the businessman-stepfather, "Mr. normal-looking gentleman," is very effective.

It's rather amazing that the lawyer gets the businessman to say the things he says, but it's so well done, we don't stop to question it. (This is the loophole I mentioned earlier, but when actors like this get going, I am willing to forgive almost anything.)

Giulia Pagano, as brilliant Claudia Faith Draper, does her best to not walk away with the play. Pagano is an actress of immense strength. She has terrific timing, a quick mind, a mobile face and tremendous presence.

Dana Keeler, as the silent recorder, gives us an effective epilogue at the finale.

Costumes and set suit the action. Bravo for this production.

detail with a mean, searing pleasure, but the agony at the heart of the speech somehow proves that this "nut" is hardly nuts in any conventional sense.

PAGANO HAS total credibility as the character who understands every- one else.

Patricia Morison as Rose Kirk, the rather theatrical mother hiding behind her suburban veneer, has a good moment in the dock when she throws her unanswered letters on the floor. Her confusion as Claudia's mother is quite understandable.

William R. Riker as the "Republican, but smart" Judge Murdoch has neat gestures that serve him well. He seems a good listener and is.

Gregory T. Daniel is endearing as officer Harry Haggerty, the guard "with nothing to gain." Dave Florek is fine as Franklin Macmillan, the prosecutor. And Peter J. Saputo, as Dr. Herbert Rosenthal, who speaks in jargonese until Claudia gets to him, is believably unimaginative — that most tragic flaw in a psychiatrist.

Dana Keeler, as the silent recorder, gives us an effective epilogue at the finale.

Costumes and set suit the action. Bravo for this production.

See the Thursday, Jan. 20, issue for an interview with Patricia Morison, co-starring in the Birmingham Theatre production of "Nuts."

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