

Theater Review

'Hauptmann' Is Brought to Life

Lindbergh Trial Riveting in Retelling

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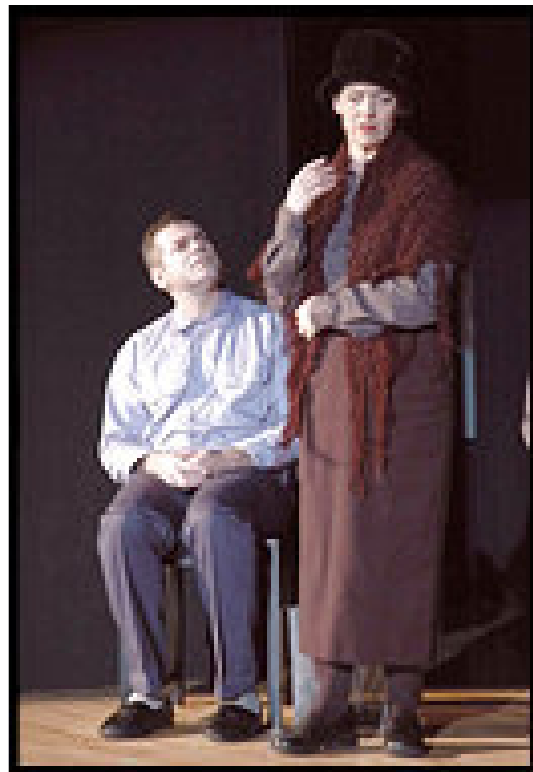
Port City Playhouse opens its 2005-06 season with a stunning example of the power of theater to compel thoughtful reflection.

"Hauptmann," written by John Logan, is an intense study of the trial of the German immigrant convicted and executed for the 1932 kidnapping and murder of aviator Charles A. Lindbergh's baby. The play is completely absorbing, forcing the viewer to question aspects of the justice system. It also generates an emotional response as we strain against being dragged to the looming, inevitable conclusion. It's serious but completely entertaining, primarily because of the skills of Michael Kharfen, whose virtuoso performance as Bruno Richard Hauptmann is certain to be a top contender at award time.

Port City Playhouse has earned a reputation for excellence in intimate dramas, but, unfortunately, it tends to attract audiences smaller than those that gather elsewhere for the uninspired, oft-produced comedies, dramas and recycled musicals that constitute so much of local theater fare. This is a must-see production for theatergoers who want good work to flourish.

This is Hauptmann's story, told from his point of view and expressed directly by him to the audience. Vignettes break up Kharfen's monologues, as Hauptmann's first contact with police, his incarceration and the trial and its aftermath are recreated. This was the first media circus, initially as the fair-haired hero of the skies faced personal tragedy, and then as the vaguely shifty, unappealing defendant stood alone in the glaring spotlight of public attention, the nation convinced of his guilt despite suspect evidence.

Now, with the emotion long since faded away, we can see the facts more clearly. Lindbergh's golden aura, severely tarnished as we now know of his anti-Semitism and pro-Nazi sympathies, doesn't obscure the proceedings. The questionable police investigation and legal tactics of the prosecution have left the distinct impression that justice was not fully served, that it is at least



Michael Kharfen, left, as Bruno Richard Hauptmann, who was executed in the death of the Lindbergh baby, and Mari Pappas as wife Anna Hauptmann. (By Doug Olmsted)

possible Hauptmann was killed by the state not because he was guilty but because he was conveniently available. Logan gives Kharfen the tools to bring Hauptmann to life, not necessarily as an innocent man but as a real man and not a cartoon villain. Kharfen uses those tools with passion and consummate skill; his Hauptmann is a haunted, sympathetic figure. But Kharfen also blends in enough nuance to allow for differing interpretations, and the character's self-proclaimed innocence cannot be taken for granted.

Kharfen is usually drenched in harsh, bright light on an otherwise gloomy stage, his frightened aspect adding to the sense that he is an insect pinned under a microscope. As he warms to his task of telling his story, Hauptmann gradually relaxes and we see more of the man's character, his grievances and his defiance, as well as his loneliness and sorrow. Sounding authentic with German-accented English, Kharfen is careful not to play on our natural sympathies for the underdog; he creates a multidimensional and flawed man. That complements Logan's script, which engages the minds of the audience to ponder the question of guilt.

Amazingly enough, Kharfen is also called on to play Hauptmann's inept, alcoholic defense attorney, which elevates his already remarkable performance to tour-de-force status. A supporting cast of six plays multiple roles, with Mari Pappas vivid as Hauptmann's wife Anna. Anne Morrow Lindbergh's mixture of sorrow and grace is palpably evinced by Lorraine Magee, and Donald Neal plays the prosecuting attorney like a lion hunting a lamb. Director Gloria DuGan was less successful casting other parts, but the weaknesses in supporting performances do not mar the overall effect of this thoroughly stimulating experience.

"Hauptmann," performed by Port City Playhouse, continues through Oct. 15, at the Lee Center for the Performing Arts, 1108 Jefferson St., Alexandria. Showtime is 8 p.m. Tuesday, Fridays and Saturdays. For information or tickets, call 703-838-2880 or visit www.portcityplayhouse.com.