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'Betrayal' a Compelling Affair

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Creating a sense of psychological dynamics on the stage is a daunting challenge because such truths are often found not in the words or overt actions of characters but between the lines.

That is certainly the case with Harold Pinter's "Betrayal," the story of an affair and the many forms of duplicity it spawns among a woman, her lover and her husband. The 1978 play is famous for Pinter's sparse dialogue and English understatement and for the way he presents the tale mostly in reverse chronological order, starting with a meeting of the lovers several years after the end of the affair and moving back through time to its beginnings.

Along the way, the time-shifting strategy works to deepen our appreciation of the subtle underpinnings of the characters' motivations rather than focusing on the plot developments, as we know from the start how it all turns out.

The play is a difficult undertaking, requiring a deft touch to build dramatic tension through timing and mood rather than action. Director Leslie A. Kobylinski has found just the right balance in the Port City Playhouse production of "Betrayal," creating a low-key but compelling triangle of deceit in which ironies both bedevil and bind the participants.

We meet Emma and Jerry as they catch up on each other's lives, raking over the ashes of an illicit, seven-year relationship several years after the embers have died. The polite chitchat gradually begins to reveal the many facets of betrayal that the affair engendered. For instance, Jerry is a close friend of Emma's husband, Robert, adding another layer of disloyalty.

Robert has his own secrets, including the fact that he had known of the affair for years but did not bring it up to Jerry. Emma has not always been honest with Jerry about her relationship with her husband, and on and on in a psychological hall of mirrors. There is even a sense that Jerry feels cheated because Robert never let on to him that he, too, has been unfaithful.

We never meet Jerry's wife, who might also be having an affair. The play might have been too unwieldy if her life were added to the mix.

Pinter makes his points about a society in which people cannot candidly relate to each other in a straightforward manner through a series of nine, mostly brief scenes, played here without intermission. It is very stylized, with terse and understated dialogue. Witness this pithy exchange as Emma declares her infidelity to Robert: "We're lovers," she says. Robert replies, "Ah, yes, I thought it might be something like

that."

The cast is excellent. Playing Emma, Sheri S. Herren must traverse the most emotional territory as we see this woman dealing with both her husband and her lover. Herren successfully portrays the subtle changes of a woman dealing with the nuances of love. David Sher's Jerry is a smug sort, struggling to maintain his equilibrium in his gradually shifting relationships. Larry Daniele's Robert exudes firm control and even a few hints at darkness as he ultimately betrays the betrayers.

Kobylinski has crafted a mood that matches the dialogue. The actors are economical in their movement and allow the spaces between the sentences to breathe and the dense, layered nuances of their words to resonate.

Scene changes enhance the atmosphere. Evocative music plays, and the minimal settings are rearranged with deliberate but ballet-like precision and languid pacing. In marked counterpoint, as the lives of the three characters are deconstructed, the simple piano chords gradually become louder and more complex, even as Grant Kevin Lane's simple, abstract and elegant set is gradually stripped away.

"Betrayal," by Port City Playhouse, concludes this weekend at Nannie J. Lee Center, 1108 Jefferson St., Alexandria. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday. For tickets or information, call 703-838-2880.

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