

A Few Bitter Laughs In Port City's 'Dresser'

By Michael J. Toscano - Special to The Washington Post - Thursday, April 17, 2008; VA07

"The Dresser," at [Alexandria's](#) Port City Playhouse, can be seen as either a multilayered character study of survival or a bitter ode to the theatrical life. Either way, this is not a comedy, despite Port City's promotional material. There are some laughs, hearty ones, but the themes and tone are generally dark.

The play, however, is not dreary. "The Dresser" is an absorbing, well-crafted production that fairly crackles with a tart zing.

Playwright Ronald Harwood takes us backstage at a seedy theater in an English province during World War II. The Nazi blitz is at its height. Air raid sirens and exploding bombs provide an evocative soundtrack to the drama taking place in a fading actor's dressing room.

The befuddled old thespian has to pull himself together for yet another go at "King Lear," aided immeasurably by the ministrations of his longtime dresser, who is a combination valet, nursemaid and palace guard. The characters are indelibly etched by Harwood, who draws on his experiences as a dresser in the 1950s. Harwood served a popular English actor who, like the character in the play, also managed a touring company.

Port City's play was directed by Rosemary Hartman, who has a deft touch with intimate, character-driven drama. Veteran performer Donald Neal plays the magnificent wreckage of a man called Sir. Neal undergoes a remarkable transformation, as Sir shows up late for the night's show, hung over and disoriented. His face slack and drained, Neal steadily rebuilds the man as he daubs makeup, adds bits of costume and deals with various members of the company. Finally, Sir achieves a precarious balance and is ready to face his audience and himself one more time.

The convention in drama is to take the reverse course, to break down a character to reveal some inner truth. But here Neal succeeds in showing the inner man by building a facade. It's a rather remarkable turn.

Neal is matched by Matthew Randall as long-suffering [Norman](#), the fussy helpmate. Randall's movements are always precise. He is fey but never campy, and his motions are crisply mechanical, befitting a man who has done these pre-show tasks a thousand times.

Norman is ostensibly content in service, but Randall's furtive nips from a hip flask and the obsessive fingering of a towel reveal the character's inner turmoil. All the members of the traveling troupe seem to suffer for their art, or, rather, their obsession with their art. But it is a final exclamation from Norman that is a bracing reminder that despite the collaborative nature of the theater, it can ultimately be a harsh and unforgiving mistress.

Hartman's production is rich with ambiance, especially with the help of David Correia's evocative sound design. Correia blends elements including period music ("The White Cliffs of Dover") and the rumbling voice of [Winston Churchill](#).

Neal and Randall layer character in Act 1, and Hartman pushes her cast of seven to broad humor as Act 2 begins. Here, the ragtag group has to get "King Lear" underway, and their star on the stage. But the laughs are a brief respite, with bitter moments to follow.

Hartman allows the pace to seem deliberate, except for the frantic and skillfully staged moments when we see the backstage machinations of mounting "King Lear." Yet, the time seems to fly, helped, no doubt, by the supporting cast, who all turn in credible performances.

Also of note, during an opening weekend performance, Neal briefly attempted an English accent. It really didn't work, and he quickly abandoned the effort. The accent was not missed, and his courage in choosing his priorities contributed to a memorable portrayal.

"The Dresser" continues through April 26, performed by Port City Playhouse at the Lee Center for the Performing Arts, 1108 Jefferson St., Alexandria. Fridays, Saturdays and April 22, 8 p.m.