

Macabre 'Veronica's Room' Has Its Secrets

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Chilling. Suspenseful. Compelling. Spooky. Really good.

That's pretty much all I'm allowed to say about "Veronica's Room," the macabre play onstage at Alexandria's Port City Playhouse. After all, the program admonishes theatergoers: "For the enjoyment of future audiences, it will be appreciated if you do not disclose the plot of the play." (I also suggest you do not read the "Director's Notes" printed right over that warning label. Director Roy Hammond managed to include a plot spoiler in his essay.)

We don't want to give away any of the surprises, twists and turns that come at you in this dark little exercise in dread and anxiety. But it might be helpful to know that the playwright is Ira Levin, who brought us the enduring mystery thriller "Deathtrap" and the satanically unnerving "Rosemary's Baby." Now, at least, you know what ballpark we're playing in.

It probably wouldn't hurt to offer the briefest sketch of the play. It takes place in a small town in the outlying Boston suburbs. As we are introduced to the characters, a college student on a dinner date has already met an older couple at the restaurant, and they have asked her to do them an unusual favor. After a slow and balky start, in which Levin awkwardly backs his way into the plot, things abruptly change, and we are thrown into a disturbing spiral of events.

The challenge and the rewards of this play lie not in the plot, characters or dialogue, none of which is stellar. They are found in the ability of director and cast to take what Levin has given them and create a sense of mounting anxiety that inexorably builds almost to the point of being unbearable. That is fully accomplished here. The four actors hold your attention with strong performances, as Levin slowly begins to dole out small details that create the nagging sense that something foul is afoot.

Credit Hammond for not overemphasizing theatrics, as might be tempting. He lets the delicious sense of dread build organically, rather than with overt scare tactics. He probably should have pushed the cast to a more energetic pace over the rough patches in Act 1, but he has succeeded in crafting a perfectly played and dynamic Act 2.

As the hardy actors ratchet up the energy, they begin to play off each other, and the sparks fly. Simultaneously, a creepy ambiance develops. Part of the challenge is that the cast is performing in the huge and sterile auditorium of the Lee Center for the Performing Arts, which puts the audience far from the actors and diminishes any sense of intimacy. That makes it all the more remarkable that they avoid overplaying the action and are still able to draw us into the sinister world they are creating.

The players are anchored by the vivid performance of Wendy R. Couchman as The Girl (even using names might affect your enjoyment). Couchman skillfully shows us various facets of character that are grounded in realism but nevertheless keeps us trying to figure out if we're all in some corner of the Twilight Zone. Her strong portrayal is ably supported by Cal Whitehurst as The Man, Sherrionne Brown as The Woman and Jerry Casagrande as The Young Man.

Hammond also designed the set, a nicely appointed bedroom that has been left over from a previous era. It's supposed to have been decorated in the 1930s, but he has given it a Victorian-era look that, while

inappropriate, does look spookier. He should have considered that as the play calls for lots of vigorous banging on doors, the walls need to be solid and sturdily constructed. The shaking of the walls chips away at the sense of realism so carefully built by the actors.

"Veronica's Room" continues through Feb. 8, performed by Port City Playhouse at the Lee Center for the Performing Arts, 1108 Jefferson St., Alexandria. Showtime Fridays, Saturdays and Tuesday is 8 p.m. A matinee Feb. 8 begins at 3 p.m. For information and reservations, call 703-838-2880 or visit <http://www.portcityplayhouse.com>.