

Port City Gets Lots of Laughs In Little Time

By Michael Toscano

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Port City Playhouse closes out a season that has solidified its status as one of the area's best local theater troupes with a sparkling production of two slightly less sparkling works, under the title "Power Plays."

The first one-act play was written by the legendary Elaine May, the second by character actor Alan Arkin. May and Arkin shared stage time decades ago at Chicago's renowned Second City improvisational comedy troupe, and their absurdist sensibility has carried over into both works. Directed by C. Evans Kirk, they are quite amusing and skillfully performed, but light as froth.

The title "Power Plays" is meant to add a sense of thematic cohesion and depth to what are really elongated sketches. The inferred intellectual grounding suggests the stories explore the shifting dynamics of power within relationships. That case can be made. Or you can just enjoy four talented actors generating a lot of laughs with some truly silly business.

In May's "The Way of All Fish," (which refers to a type of male fish that supposedly becomes female if a more powerful male fish takes up residence nearby), a high-powered executive and her seemingly meek secretary end

up sharing a takeout dinner in the office one evening. As the executive, Jane Petkofsky plays it broadly, projecting authority and barely controlled emotional tumult, frequently struggling to regain her composure. Rusty O'Connor is subtler but even funnier as the mousy subordinate who walks a fine line between obeying and controlling her boss. By the time the food is delivered and several glasses of wine are downed, O'Connor's mouse is sharing some rather scary fantasies that revolve around murder. She matter-of-factly analyzes the risks of one method over another as Petkofsky's executive grows increasingly uncomfortable, and the power begins



Jane Petkofsky, left, and Rusty O'Connor in Elaine May's "The Way of All Fish," one of two short and silly plays that make up Port City Playhouse's production of "Power Plays." (By Doug Olmsted)

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shifting between them.

Things seesaw between the two for a while, highlighted by May's sense of the absurd and split-second timing from Petkofsky, who also displays some impressive physical prowess, and O'Connor, who makes her character's duality quite believable.

After intermission, it's Arkin's "Virtual Reality," which delves even more deeply into wacky, surreal farce. Two men involved in a murky, apparently illegal enterprise debate their identities and the details of their mission through ironic and paradoxical dialogue, veering frequently into absurd arguments over irrelevant side issues. Guy Palace plays a character for whom control is all and who demands they prepare by pantomiming a trial run of the job. Jason Braswell's character initially resists but ultimately immerses himself fully in the fantasy, until the line between imagination and reality is erased.

Palace's flashing eyes and expressive movement are marvelously calibrated for maximum comic effect, while Braswell concentrates on vocal expression. The duo is hampered by the fact that the play goes on much too long and the audience becomes restless, but the actors draw full attention back to them at the climax.

The unaccredited scenic design is appropriately minimalist, with just a few simple panels and a Manhattan skyline. Jeffrey Scott Auerbach's lighting should be so subtle; instead it is often shadowy and overpowers the acting with sledgehammer sensitivity during a critical scene in "The Way of All Fish," a power play, indeed.

"Power Plays" actually is a trilogy, but Port City has cut one of May's plays, the reason for which might be found in the program, where a notice warns patrons that they must clear out before 10:30 p.m. because of a stern edict issued by the Lee Center, which is run by the City of Alexandria. The city fathers needn't worry about their security guard losing sleep; with the longest segment excised, the play now runs only about 1 hour 35 minutes. Thanks for caring, Alexandria!

"Power Plays," performed by Port City Playhouse, continues through June 25 at the Lee Center Stage, 1108 Jefferson St., Alexandria. Performances on Fridays, Saturdays and this Tuesday at 8 p.m. For tickets, call 703-838-2880. For tickets and information, visit <http://www.portcityplayhouse.com>.