

Hess and Lindsey on beat in *Six Dance Lessons* at Theatre Too

Review by Martha Heimberg

An aging widow (*Elly Lindsay*) hires a closeted gay dance instructor (*Bob Hess*) to come to her high-rise condo in St Petersburg Beach, Florida to give her *Six Dance Lessons in Six Weeks*, the title of Richard Alfieri's charming comedy about the unlikely friendship that develops between two lonely people, despite their apparent differences. *Terry Dobson* directs his two-member cast with comic nuance and a smart pacing of dance music at Theatre Too, the intimate downstairs space at Theatre Three in the Quadrangle.

Hess is a wonderfully manic and sardonic Michael, the transplanted New York "chorus boy" trying to pay the rent in Florida by hiring out to teach ballroom dancing to whoever calls the studio. Lindsey's Lilly is white-haired and pretty, a Southern girl trained to be sweet obedient – but yearning to cut loose, both verbally and physically! She's Michael's first client – and she greets him at the door with a tentative smile and a retired school-marm's sense of correct behavior, mixed with surprising latitude for her instructor's sudden outbursts of profanity and "sociological comment" on the dances he teaches.

For the first lesson, Michael rolls out a plastic sheet with basic Swing steps printed on it. "Without the steps, you're just a cow on the dance floor," he tells poor Lilly. But this lady's no cow – and when he puts the Andrew Sisters on his portable CD player and they begin to dance – it turns out this old gal can definitely boogie down.

The fun of the show is the progression of the dance lessons, both in sophistication and difficulty –mirroring the progression of their friendship through equally tricky maneuvers. The second week Michael shows up in a Zorro outfit to teach Lilly to tango. The two must first negotiate some personal history inventions. Lilly just pretends she has a husband who'll show up any minute – and Michael has made up a story about a dying wife who he must support so Lilly won't cancel his lessons at the agency. He defines himself as something of a "passive-aggressive queen with a bad attitude." They argue their way through his declaration that her background as the wife of a Southern Baptist minister just might lead him to believe there's bigotry in the household. But finally they launch into the tango -- what Michael calls "musical foreplay" – to the melodramatic beat of "Hernando's Hideaway."

For the third lesson Michael appears in black tie and tux, all set to whirl Lilly around the apartment to a Viennese waltz. Not to be outdone, Lilly looks downright glam in black sequins. But before the music can begin, the two have a near knockdown and drag-out over the various versions of themselves they've presented as truth. Mustering her anger, she tells him, "You are an annoying, recalcitrant reprobate!" to which Michael replies, "Crazy faggot will do." Once they've laughed off their anger, the two get down to the waltz to the melody of "Moon River," and the scene closes to Andy Williams crooning an old love song.

Even more revelations are discovered or confessed when Michael comes in his fedora to teach Lilly to foxtrot to Sinatra's "The Best Is Yet to Come." She's out of sorts, and he wants to know why. By now he's comfortable enough to joke and call her a "seductive slut," and she slips up and tells him how old she actually is. "If you say your real age out loud your face hears you," she declares in defense of her lie.

And so it goes – they learn about each other through fighting – but they both love to dance – and they're both good at it. The shared rhythm of the dance holds them together while they get to know each other's past, mostly through sarcastic verbal exchanges.

By intermission they still have the marimba and "contemporary dance" to get through, so don't go away! The hilarious and touching final lesson – rockin' to the Beach Boys' "Surfin' U.S.A." is an all-out burning of calories – and emotion. What might be melodrama with lesser actors is a moving finale here. Hess and Lindsay deliver like pros – and the audience leaves the small theater ready to dance and get closer to somebody special.

Six Dance Lessons in Six Weeks is onstage at Theatre Too, 2800 Routh Street, through September 20th, with Thursday performances at 7:30 p.m., Friday and Saturday shows at 8 p.m., and Sunday matinees at 2:30 p.m. Tickets are \$25 to \$30; for reservations call 214-871-3300 or check www.theatre3dallas.com