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Stage

Danse, macabre

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Gay men tango — with women and each other — in two shows this week

THE PLAY'S THE THING

Deathtrap, Pocket Sandwich Theatre, 5400 E. Mockingbird Lane. Through Sept. 26.

Six Dance Lessons in Six Weeks, Theatre Too, 2900 Routh S. in the Quadrangle. Through Sept. 20.

Most gay men, at least those of a certain age, know the big twist in Deathtrap better than their straight brethren, based primarily on the film version. The stage version now at Pocket Sandwich Theatre doesn't have the infamous surprise kiss (a lingering caress stands in its place), but there's no avoiding the gay reveal. It's a testament to the tight structure of Ira Levin's comedy-thriller that, even at 30 years and counting, the play still has the capacity to shock audiences.

At least, until the very end. Deathtrap suffers from one of the weakest endings of its genre, but it also benefits from the cleverest concept: A play called Deathtrap about a playwright (Dennis Millegan) who reads a play by another playwright (Beau Trujillo) called Deathtrap who... well, it's so endlessly self-referential, you can pat yourself on the back for simply keeping up.

But PST's staging is among the better versions, owing to a generally tight cast who realize there's a "comedy" element to a "comedy-thriller." Director Cindee Mayfield cultivates the drawing-room humor and lets the menace take care of itself (the other Act 1 shocker had half the audience scream in horror).

Millegan plays the bitter cynic Sidney Bruhl with convincing venom, although his interpretation is more priggish than obsessive. Trujillo uses his intensity to excellent effect. Probably the best performance, though, is from Trista Wyly. Her Myra, a ball raw of nerves, gets some of the biggest laughs in memory.

It's too bad that the excellent set was so poorly lit on review night, with spots flickering off and on incessantly. If they wanted to "gaslight" us, they should have put on Angel Street.

The tango in Deathtrap is metaphorical: wit vs. wit; at Theatre Too, it's literal, as Michael (Bob Hess), a flamboyantly gay ageing chorus boy, teaches Lily (Elly Lindsay), a lonely widow, how to cha-cha her way into a real life.

Where Deathtrap's structure is labyrinthine, Six Dance Lessons in Six Weeks relies more on gimmickry: six scenes (plus a bonus "lesson") that encapsulate the evolving relationship between these unlikely loners. But while it turns easily mawkish, with sitcom-esque scene breaks where you can imagine the commercials fitting, playwright Richard Alfieri's script is unexpectedly clever and improbably sweet (even as it gets in plenty of withering digs at religious hypocrisy and homophobia).

Hess and Lindsay make for an engaging odd couple, and both master Alfieri's snappy dialogue (it of the Neil Simon zinger style), but there's both poison and some heart in the lines. "If you say your real age, your face hears you," Lily laments — and more than a few bluehairs in the audience chuckled a little too loudly not to get it. And more than a few were men. Six Dance Lessons waltzes around with lots of good will.

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DEATH BECOMES THEM | A fading playwright (Dennis Millegan, right) plots to steal a play from his protege (Beau Trujillo) to his wife's (Trista Wyly) horror in 'Deathtrap.'



THE ODD COUPLE | A gay dance instructor (Bob Hess) forms a bond with a minister's wife (Elly Lindsay) in 'Six Dance Lessons.'