



Theatre Three's 'Garden' is a 'gloriously batty' outdoors romp

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By **LAWSON TAITTE** / The Dallas Morning News
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If you want to know all the secrets in Alan Ayckbourn's neighborhood, go see *Garden*.

Theatre Three is currently performing the British playwright's double bill, *House & Garden*. The same 14 actors, directed by Bruce R. Coleman, portray the same roles in two plays at once. In the main upstairs space, *House* shows us what's happening to the rich folks in an old country mansion. *Garden* opened in the basement's Theatre Too! on Monday. It depicts the preparations for an ill-fated annual bazaar on the lawn outside.

The goings-on in *Garden* are rather more fun than in the slower-paced *House*, but it shows up more of the limitations of some of the actors. Perhaps that's because the scenes and lines are more equally distributed among the performers.

Everybody knows that Teddy Platt (J. Brent Alford) and Joanna Mack (Marisa Diotalevi) have been having an affair, except Joanna's trusting husband, Giles (Greg Forshay). The children know, the servants know, it seems that even casual visitors quickly get the picture. When Teddy tries to call the relationship to a halt, Joanna goes gloriously batty.

In *Garden*, in fact, pretty much everyone behaves as if they had gone a little mad. The new amour that Teddy begins with a visiting French actress gives Mr. Alford and Emily Gray great opportunities for broad comedy. Terry Vandivort hams it up as the gardener who does his best to sabotage the impending party, while Joshua Peterson as the young volunteer organizing the fete's setup self-righteously badgers his put-upon wife (Cheryl Lowber).

Everybody drinks too much, everybody flirts or is flirted with, almost everybody has a pratfall or two. For those who might have already seen *House*, lots of loose ends get tied up – and all sorts of unexpected events transpire. Even so, red herrings abound: Why does Joanna run off with a piece of table decoration from the house, for instance, and what becomes of the cakes that get sprayed with poison?

Two of the most elegant actors in *House*, Kerry Cole and Regan Adair, hardly show up in *Garden* at all. We miss their high style – and their secure British accents, which some of the performers in *Garden* don't do very convincingly. The more rambunctious comedy here also loses some of the grounding in realism that makes *House* persuasive.

Still, *Garden* has more laughs, and Ms. Gray turns in one of the most seductive and vivacious performances of the year. Either play can presumably stand on its own. But if you skip either, you'll remain seriously in the dark about what happens to some of these 14 kooky characters.

PLAN YOUR LIFE Through Aug. 10 at Theatre Three. Runs 155 mins. \$10 to \$40. 214-871-3300, www.theatre3dallas.com.