



'House & Garden' great at precision, pratfalls

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In *House & Garden*, the little mysteries around the edges of the comedy are a big part of the fun – especially if you're seeing only one.

Theatre Three is presenting Alan Ayckbourn's intricately constructed double bill. *House* and *Garden* are actually two separate scripts, performed in two different spaces.

But they're performed by the same cast portraying the same 14 characters, simultaneously. Each stands alone, and requires a separate evening and a second ticket.

House officially opened in the upstairs space on Sunday. The actors were rushing up and down the stairs to do *Garden* as well, but its press opening isn't until tonight. As you see one play, you infer, or guess, what must be happening in the other. But you don't quite know for sure.

House takes place in the country mansion of an old British family, the Platts. Various parts of the building have been falling down or burning up and then rebuilt for centuries – but that's nothing compared to the dark fates of the women who've married into the clan.

Things are in a bad way for the current inhabitants. Teddy Platt (J. Brent Alford), a fatuous blowhard, has maintained the family fortune but refuses to take on the political responsibilities his ancestors relished. His wife, Trish (Kerry Cole), is so frustrated with the marriage she won't even acknowledge his presence. Their bright but selfish daughter Sally (Maxey Whitehead) can't get her mother to admit there's a problem.

Preparations are afoot outside to hold an annual bazaar, and a minor French movie star (Emily Gray) is coming to town to open it.

But a more serious guest is expected as well: Novelist Gavin Ring-Mayne (Regan Adair), an old pal, wants to persuade Teddy to take an interest in politics after all.

Mr. Ayckbourn cannily pays homage to British drawing-room comedy – and to Chekhov and even Ibsen, as well – in this half of the two-parter. It concentrates on the upper-class folks and their foibles and observes reluctantly that they're still in control of things.

Director Bruce R. Coleman has assembled a cast that manages the high comedy elegantly (and is quite capable of descending to pratfalls when need be).

Mr. Alford satirizes his character's obtuseness without making him farcical, and Ms. Whitehead once again creates a fully rounded, touching portrait of a complex young person.

But *House* is essentially Ms. Cole's show. Trish is a woman who sees and understands everything that's going on around her. She just doesn't know what to do about it.

Ms. Cole makes her both warm and astringent – kind of like that bottle of dry sherry that gets passed around at one point.

Now on to *Garden*.

Plan your life

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

