

# Two-Timing

## T-3 doubles your pleasure with *House* and *Garden's* interlocking production; not a lot of funny things happened at WaterTower's *Forum*

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In Theatre Three's dueling farces, *House* and *Garden*, Emily Gray, Kerry Cole (center) and J. Brent Alford swap beds and barbs.

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[Theatre Three](#), [WaterTower Theatre](#), [House and Garden](#), [Alan Ayckbourn](#), [A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum](#), [Roman comedy](#)

Two plays, one cast of characters. That's the tricky problem of *House* and *Garden*, the simultaneous double bill of Alan Ayckbourn comedies currently running 14 actors gloriously ragged on the two stages at **Theatre Three**.

Upstairs, the *House* residents, dashing around a rambling pile of bricks in the British countryside, are embroiled in several noisy crises. Teddy Platt, heir to a centuries-old family curse (Platt wives go splat in the oddest ways), expects an important visitor to ask him to run for a seat in Parliament. But Teddy, played with sexy bluster by T3 regular J. Brent Alford, is hardly fit for public scrutiny. He's not-so-secretly boffing Joanna, wife of his best friend, Dr. Giles Mace, whose house sits just beyond the Platts' back garden.

Wise to her husband's indiscretion, Trish Platt has shut down emotionally. She treats her husband like Mr. Cellophane, telling callers she hasn't seen him in days, even when he's standing a few feet away. Daughter Sally is onto dad's canoodling too, and so is the Maces' teenage son Jake, a lanky lad in full schoolboy crush mode for snappy Sally.

Below stairs, the servants are swept up in other tawdry dilemmas. Izzy the cook is shagging gardener Warn Coucher (great names here), who occasionally plows the furrows of Izzy's lazy but luscious daughter Pearl, a maid with a thing for older men, including Giles Mace.

Everyone's in a tizzy about something, not just sexual dalliances. There's a celebrity, French film star Lucille Cadeau, arriving for a fancy luncheon at the Platts' and serving as grand marshal at the village fête. The annual outdoor carnival, held on the Platt estate, is ripe for disaster, certain to be spoiled by rain, sabotage (what's Warn doing with that mower?) or some ill-timed drunken rutting in a certain fortuneteller's tent.

If *House* sags under its cumbersome layers of exposition—like most overlong comedies, even its best gags go moldy after two hours—then *Garden* makes up for it. All the fun in Ayckbourn's interlocking plays happens outdoors, played by the flower-festooned environs of the smaller Theatre Too space, where the estate's lawn, gazebo and sputtering fountain are placed.

Pause to consider the physical logistics of these remarkably slick productions. Every time actors in *House* head out the French doors of the Platt manse, they must race from the main stage at Theatre Three, through the lobby and down the 33 steep steps to Theatre Too, where *Garden* is performed. Then they go back up again and back down again and up and down and up and down for 150 minutes. Stage managers of each show keep stopwatches ticking and headphones buzzing with cues for who's supposed to be where when. If one show falls off schedule, there are built-in stretchers, such as Teddy's interactions with an ill-behaved (and unseen) hound named Spoo, and Joanna's

solo rehearsals of her confession to husband Giles. The most "crosses" in each dual performance are by actor Andrew Phifer. As Jake Mace, Phifer, a recent Austin College grad, pops in and out of each play eight times a night. At least Ayckbourn had the wisdom to exercise the stamina of the scripts' youngest character.

Theatergoers can see one or both plays (at separate performances) and come away with a sense of the whole shebang, but there are odd bits that are made clear only by sitting through the five total hours of *House* and *Garden*. For its nearly nonstop comedy, *Garden* definitely is the better of the two. Actress Marisa Diotalevi, who appears briefly upstairs, dominates the downstairs play as her character Joanna's love life unravels. When Joanna complains to Teddy that their extramarital couplings occur primarily in "summer houses, potting sheds, gazebos...*ditches*," he ditches her. That sends Joanna over the edge, or hedge in this case. Diotalevi, the finest physical comedian in Dallas theater, is Lucy-goosey (as in *Ball*) as she falls, crawls and sprawls all over the leafy scenery (designed by David Walsh and Jac Alder). The sight of Diotalevi peeping through the wall of ivy, mad as a March hare, is staggeringly silly.

Likewise, Emily Gray, playing the visiting French diva as a humpy hybrid of Catherine Deneuve and Courtney Love, gets to go into a comedic frenzy as her character grows drunker and more brazenly sexual by the minute. Her sloppy seduction of Teddy in *Garden*—done all in French—brings the house and part of the set down.

More subdued in their courtship are the teens, played by Phifer and Maxey Whitehead (as Teddy's daughter Sally), who've bonded over and been wounded by their parents' affair. These actors are in their 20s, but they make believable, sweet kids. Director Bruce R. Coleman has steered the focus of several scenes toward Jake and Sally, who are beautifully portrayed and come across as more sensible and likable than their elders.

Only one character doesn't seem to fit in *House* or *Garden*. Trish, the lady of the manor played by Kerry Cole, is written as a frigid prig, and Cole, a rather brittle actress anyway, brings such a heavy chill onstage with her that she sucks all the sunshine out of the scene whenever she appears.

And then there's the plays' weird visitor, over-tanned playboy Gavin Ryng-Mayne ("with a Y"), which actor Regan Adair now can add to his already heavy résumé of memorable turns as cads. Not only does Adair exhibit the best upper-crust English accent, he brings a fascinating, deliberately halting rhythm to his snake-y persona, like one of those handsome but oleaginous villains Alec Baldwin was so good at before he plumped up. When Gavin starts putting moves on young Sally in *House*, the laughs stop for good reason. But he gets his hilarious comeuppance moments later (chronologically) in *Garden*. Somehow Adair manages to slither coolly in and out of both plays without ever being out of breath from the journey up and down those stairs.

*House* and *Garden* may be slogs for the actors, but they're a breezy good time for the audience.

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The title of the show is ***A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum***, and that's an accurate description of the version currently on view at Addison's **WaterTower Theatre**. A funny thing does happen. One funny thing. In two-and-a-half hours. And it's not much, just a chuckle-inducing moment of vaudeville in a production that starts on a sour note, goes flat and stays flat to the bitter end.

Stephen Sondheim's 1962 musical sports a couple of dandy tunes ("Comedy Tonight," "Lovely") and a bawdy libretto by punchline masters Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart, based in part on Roman comedies by Plautus written before the birth of Christ. So, jeez, what happened here? Director Terry

Martin has made the weakest, un-funniest choices in almost every area, from casting to costuming to sight gags to hiring musicians who play as if they've just seen sheet music for the first time and they've all switched instruments on a dare. The drummer's off the beat, the horns screech and the trombones are a mess. It's like they tuned up in the key of F.U.

*Forum* is pure farce begging for pretty broad comedy and lots of pretty broads. The story is a classic jumble of clever servants, wealthy masters, mistaken identities and horny virgins. Slaves named Pseudolus (played by the extraordinarily unpleasant David Stroh) and Hysterium (Andy Baldwin reprising his same shtick from *Trailer Park Musical*) try to win freedom by orchestrating the romance of their master's son Hero (Sean Patrick Henry) with Philia (Kimberly Whalen), property of next-door brothel owner Lycus (Charles Ryan Roach). High jinks ensue, or should anyway, involving a clutch of dancing courtesans (sadly, a string of dead-eyed hoofers at WaterTower) and the Roman general (G. Shane Peterman) who has paid to bed Philia. Interrupting the action now and then is a doddering fool (Gordon Fox, who gets the one big laugh in the show) wandering the Seven Hills of Rome.

The second act features a chase scene that should have the antic energy of *Keystone Cops*. At WaterTower, people just run on and off, often with empty beats between exit and entrance. And it was a jolt on opening night, not a humorous one, when during the chase poor Philia, wearing tottery 5-inch heels, fell hard onto her kneecaps. One of the less cadaverous courtesans helped her offstage.

Wait, there is another funny bit worth mentioning: the scenery. Scenic designer Randel Wright has created the *Forum* set as a deviously visual giggle, using dollar-store doodads to serve as fancy columns, gilded cherubs and other witty touches over the stage's three main doorways. Look closely at the golden fringe on the gauzy curtains that form the proscenium arch—those are hundreds of spoons dangling daintily over the proceedings.

Shovels would have been more appropriate.