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Front Page](#)

## Pick Your Poison

Alan Ayckbourn's "Snake in the Grass" doesn't have much bite, but Theatre Three's staging has a lasting effect.

by *Mark Lowry*

Published Sunday, November 1, 2009

Prolific British playwright Alan Ayckbourn has to be the most produced living playwright in the English language, probably only rivaled by his American counterpart Neil Simon. It's no wonder why Ayckbourn's plays generate word-of-mouth praise and typically translate to box office success: They're often witty, sometimes gimmicky and, 95 percent of the time, guaranteed to be genuinely funny.

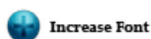
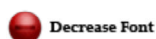
His 2002 play *Snake in the Grass* will have audiences talking for different reasons, mainly that it's atypical of him. While there is some dark comedy, it's a suspenseful horror thriller that plays better in intimate spaces. If Circle Theatre's 2007 area premiere of the show was spine-chilling in its small basement theater, then **Theatre Three's** staging in its even smaller Theatre Too! space delivers more creeps.

Annabel Chester (Cindee Mayfield) and Miriam (Lisa Fairchild) are sisters who need to wrap up the details of their father's estate after his death. Annabel is the beneficiary, but Miriam has been the caretaker of the property. The big issue at hand is the father's nurse, Alice (Lydia Mackay), who tries to blackmail the sisters for £100,000, claiming she has proof that Miriam killed the father. When Alice meets both sisters to make sure her demands are met, the play takes a twist.

In the conversations between the sisters, past scandals come out, including that there may have been sexual abuse, and that Annabel was mistreated during tennis lessons. Whatever happened, it must have been pretty bad, because there's something eerie still happening in the rundown tennis court that borders the estate's garden where the play's action happens.



From left: Cindee Mayfield, Lisa Fairchild and Lydia Mackay. Photo by Ken Birdsell.



### Snake in the Grass

by Alan Ayckbourn

**Presented by Theatre Three**

October 26 - November 15  
at **Theatre Three (Theater Too!)**

2800 Routh St.  
Dallas, TX 75219  
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Directed by Bruce R. Coleman, T3's production builds suspense and handles the comical macabre aspects well. David Walsh's garden set works nicely on Theatre Too's oblong thrust stage and Paul Arnold's lighting and Marco E. Salinas' sound capably elicit the desired eeriness.

All the performances are in tune with Coleman's swift-moving vision. Mackay is particularly terrific as a dowdy nurse who is the cause of most of the play's simultaneous gasps and guffaws. Mayfield makes her character's health issues and anxiety believable, and Fairchild (who, interestingly, played Alice in Circle's production) has the appropriate mix of innocence and mischievousness, although the script doesn't help her much. This is a mystery in which there is relatively no element of surprise. The snake in this grass isn't stealthy enough.

Something spooky from a playwright known for comedy: That may not be the right reason audiences will gab about this show, but at least they'll be talking.

TJ



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