

The Pitch

A busy Fringe unspools, and Kansas Repertory Theatre stakes a claim in Lawrence

DEBORAH HIRSCH AND LIZ COOK — JUL 26, 2016 4 PM



Michael Samuel Kaplan sees what no one else does in *Harvey* (photo by Luke Jordan)

It's been a busy month for theater, and it isn't slowing down. While CST's Invasion and the Fringe Festival have been staging a range of shows in KC, Kansas Repertory Theatre, in nearby Lawrence, is producing two shows through the end of the month. Part of KU's department of theatre, KRT "operates as a professional company," says assistant professor and director Peter Zazzali, with Equity and visiting actors, guest directors, and faculty and students working together in rotating productions.

First staged in London under the name *Gas Light* and made into the Hollywood film *Gaslight*, Patrick Hamilton's 1941 *Angel Street* is a parlor-room drama — part whodunit, part thriller, part comedy — that has retained its power to grip.

Set in 1880 Victorian England, in a house on London's Angel Street, the story opens on Mr. and Mrs. Manningham, a seemingly content couple sharing an afternoon. But the dynamic between them starts to shift, and we see that Mr. Manningham (Michael Samuel Kaplan) vacillates between charmer and tormenter. He dangles a night of theater before his wife, but he's just toying. And he's only getting started.

I felt a tinge of guilt watching Mrs. Manningham (Abby Sharp) pine for a night out as I enjoyed my own diversion. But that's the effect of Sharp's supple performance as she swings among emotional states. We empathize, we care about this wife, in love with a husband who is humiliating and manipulating her into thinking she's going mad.

He has motive. As her husband, the excellent Kaplan shifts from mildly threatening to sinister, flying into rages with the smoothness of a purring engine. Treating his wife with "kindness, cunning, harshness," his Manningham, we see, is an abuser. But he's more than that. And as the play progresses, just his arrival in a scene creates unease.

Enter Detective Sgt. Rough, who in this production is portrayed by a woman (Jeanne Averill), an "anachronistic choice," Zazzali admits, given that London didn't have female detectives at the time. But his wish is to veer from the play's sexist view that renders women helpless. It works. Mischievous but hard-driven, with a big personality and a Scottish brogue, Averill's Rough nearly dominates in a delightful performance that adds both humor and just the right melodramatic tone.

As two household servants, Gail Trottier and Bri Woods do good work as the loyal Elizabeth and the saucy Nancy, respectively. Leah Mazur's lighting design adds to the suspense and shifting moods (she also designed the period costumes).

"You sit on the edge of your chair most of the time," Eleanor Roosevelt said of the play back in the day. Over at KRT, under Zazzali's direction, that's still the case. — *D.H.*

Whenever theaters stage audience favorites — fluffy drawing-room comedies, musical revues, *A Christmas Carol* — there's some low-decibel grumbling among the indie set. The unspoken implication: Light hearts are revenue-boosters. The capital-S serious artists are all off doing message plays about fluoride in breast milk.

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Shuttlecock mug courtesy of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

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Best Delayed Discovery

Kansas Repertory Theatre, Lawrence

kutheatre.com

We were late. Kansas Repertory Theatre, in Lawrence, debuted in 2014 with two summer productions, and we missed them. It produced two summer shows in 2015, and we missed those, too. So we're grateful that we were educated in time for the 2016 summer season, in which the company again staged two plays — this time, *Harvey* and *Angel Street* — in exemplary, true repertory fashion. Though part of the Department of Theatre at KU, Kansas Rep "operates as a professional company," assistant professor and director Peter Zazzali says. That means guest directors (including, this year, Kansas City's John Rensenhouse), Equity and visiting actors (including, this year, Michael Samuel Kaplan from New York and Jeanne Averill), alongside faculty and students. It's a rich mix, and it made an impression, one that will have to hold us till we visit again next year.