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Posted on Sat, Oct. 2, 2010

A brilliant, subtle take on David Mamet's family drama

By Toby Zinman
For The Inquirer

Maybe every American playwright has to write one. *The Cryptogram* is Mamet's family drama, and Simpatico Theatre Project launches its season with a brilliant and subtle production of this difficult, deeply disturbing play.

Tolstoy told us "all happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Mamet takes this one step further: "Aggression has an unlimited vocabulary. The unhappy family has myriad ways in which to be unhappy, in which to torture its members." Emotional torture is the specialty of the house of Donny (Janice Rowland) and her son John (Conrad Sager), visited by longtime friend Del (Keith Conallen).

A sensitive, insomniac child, troubled by voices. A self-absorbed mother. A homosexual friend. An absent husband/father. There is a German knife, a war memento. A puzzling photograph. A children's book about a wizard and "three misfortunes." Act 1 begins with the first, a broken teapot. Then there's a ripped blanket, which may be a misfortune from long ago. Does that mean there are still two misfortunes to happen?

The Cryptogram is a cryptogram brimming with clues, most of which we'll get only in retrospect. John asks hundreds of questions; his mother's answers are unhelpful: "Things occur. In our lives. And the meaning of them . . . the meaning of them . . . is not clear." Mamet subverts conventional domestic dialogue with oddly stilted language that sounds like code.

Allen Radway's direction is impressive in two ways: He resists the temptation to domesticate the play, and he resists the equally dangerous temptation to stylize it. Toughing out Mamet's long, tense pauses requires not only courageous direction but subtle acting, which the cast provides in abundance.

Conrad Sager as the son is extraordinary, conveying a vulnerability and a searching intelligence that is lovely and painful to watch. Janice Rowland creates an unlikable but understandable woman; her face can harden from baffled to ice in an instant.

Keith Conallen's performance as Del is so nuanced, so complex that we feel we know this man who is sometimes sensible, sometimes tender, and, finally, self-loathing. Again and again, Conallen's face is suddenly, just for an instant, suffused with emotion, his eyes well with tears. Why, we wonder. The cryptogram will yield meaning, but only after you've thought about it awhile.

Larry Fowler's sound design starts with harps and violins. Don't be fooled. Meghan Jones's set does much to evoke the era, and if you wonder why Janus Stefanowicz's costumes are from the '50s, Mamet was about 10 then.

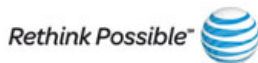
Follow Toby Zinman on Twitter at #philastage.

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Janice Rowland is Donny and Keith Conallen is Del in the Simpatico Theatre Project's production of David Mamet's "The Cryptogram."



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