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Entertainment & Life

Theater | 'The Vultures': Mystery brims with Gothic atmosphere, humor and twists

By Michael Grossberg / For The Columbus Dispatch

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Did you hear that thump? What about those ominous creaks or the peals of thunder penetrating an old mansion in "The Vultures" and scaring those seeking an inheritance?

Cliches abound – including the setting over a very dark and stormy night - but so do a richly atmospheric sound design and unexpected plot twists in Mark A. Ridge's comic mystery, which opened Friday at the Columbus Performing Arts Center.

Evolution Theatre Company's Ohio premiere offers a pleasant diversion for those interested in lighthearted fun, and especially for mystery fans eager for something different.

Director David S. Harewood knits together a 10-member ensemble into a modernized but still old-fashioned play that works better as mystery than comedy.

Suspense builds as six cousins arrive at a secluded estate for the reading of the will of a wealthy patriarch who died years before. Events require everyone to stay overnight (uh-oh!) amid ominous portents, including several things that go bump in the night.

Although cell phones amusingly accent a few scenes, the two-act two-hour-plus piece still evokes a hoary mystery melodrama from generations ago. No wonder: Ridge adapted "The Vultures" from several 1920s plays, such as "The Bat" and "The Cat and the Canary," that helped define the clichés of this genre.

Evolution Theatre Company, which bills itself as central Ohio's LGBTQIA theater, makes most plausible the gay subtext of a modernization in which several characters reveal same-sex attraction.

At Wednesday's preview, Scott Risner earned sympathy as hair-stylist Hunter West. Risner plays down some gay stereotypes, while grounding his role in psychological realism. (But is Hunter as hapless as he seems? And is he hunter or hunted?)

As accountant Paul Jones, Davion T. Brown erupts in odd peals of shrill laughter that spark audience laughter. Later, he deepens his role to reveal a warmer side. (Or is it a ruse?)

Carolyn Demanelis adopts a perky personality and Southern accent as a clueless nail technician. (But is she really that clueless?)

Sonda Rose Staley adds bite as Mary Roberts, a bitter old woman whose constant worries may reflect deeper truths. (Do darker motives lurk beneath her meanness?)

Talbot (an anonymous actor not listed in the program for good reason) adds chilling resonance as the mansion's mysterious and androgynous and severely formal housekeeper. (Think Mrs. Danvers in "Rebecca," but crossed with a supernatural touch of Madame Arcati from "Blithe Spirit.")

Rounding out the cast – or is it a list of suspects? - are Leland Leder, easygoing as a famous male-underwear model; William Darby IV, polite but reticent as a handsome realtor; Tom Holliday, as the affable estate lawyer; and two minor characters (played by Mike Gwydion Ream and David Johnson) who arrive later as authority figures.

The vivid design itself – most notably, by Katherine Wexler (scenery), Caroline Dittamo (lighting) and Riley Galvin (the eerie and naturalistic sounds) - reinforces the brooding atmosphere with a nifty mansion set that changes intriguingly (albeit too slowly in one overlong black-out) and shadowy lighting that obscures and reveals hidden crannies.

More than enough clues arise to suggest solutions to the mystery, from the house's dark history to an alleged insanity curse on the family and hints of a gas-lighting conspiracy against the heir. (But which clues can be trusted?)

Many mysteries are predictable, but "The Vultures" enjoyably defies expectations.

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