

A CurtainUp Los Angeles Review

Snake in the Grass

By Laura Hitchcock

For a moment I thought I might have my sister back.

— Miriam to Annabel

Nobody does spooky like the English but we don't usually find it condensing from the socially satiric pen of Sir Alan Ayckbourn. Nevertheless, in the North American premiere of *Snake in the Grass* from the excellent new Salem K Theatre Company, Sir Alan does spooky proud. It's even set in a crumbling old house with a deserted tennis court which plays an important part in the action, and a summerhouse with a well, designed with exquisite attention to detail down to the brick wall around the property by Laura Fiine Hawkes. The carefully shaded lighting by Leigh Allen is also an important part of the action. In fact, these elements are more active than the action.

Two sisters, Annabel (Pamela Salem) and Miriam (Claire Jacobs), are reunited after 35 years by the death of their autocratic father. He's left everything to Annabel who is greeted on her arrival from Tasmania by Nurse Alice Moody (Nicola Bertram), who tells her she has proof that Miriam murdered Dear Old Dad and will sell it for a mere \$100,000.

As the sisters work out what to do, they tell stories about their past from Miriam's punishment by the abusive and controlling Dad to Annabel's marriage to an abusive husband. "We never got on, did we?" says fat sloppy Miriam to her svelte sister. Annabel despises Miriam and Miriam has always resented her abandonment. When Nurse Alice shows up for her blackmail payoff, Miriam plies her with drugged wine and drops her down the well. This gives Ayckbourn scope for his comic skills in an uproarious Act I curtain. Act II leads us through ghost stories in the dark to what we think is the predictable climax only to have Ayckbourn pull an O.Henry ending on us.

Director Mark Rosenblatt makes the monologue-intensive script gripping and the staging exciting. Claire Jacobs has the plum comic part and plumbs it from vulnerability to needy to something more ominous. Pamela Salem, brisk and attractive as Annabel, projects a woman who never had a chance or a tendency to empathize. Nicola Bertram plays a youthful and efficient nurse/blackmailer.

The high standards of this group make it a welcome addition to the LA theatre scene. They're doing the world premiere of an American play next which will be an interesting stretch.

SNAKE IN THE GRASS

Playwright: Alan Ayckbourn

Director: Mark Rosenblatt

Cast: Pamela Salem (Annabel Chester), Nicola Bertram (Alice Moody), Claire Jacobs (Miriam Chester)

Set Design: Laura Fine Hawkes

Lighting Design: Leigh Allen

Costume Design: May Routh

Running Time: One hour 40 minutes, one intermission

Running Dates: April 4-May 4, 2008

Where: The Matrix Theatre, 7657 Melrose Avenue, West Hollywood, Reservations:
(323) 960-4420.

Reviewed by Laura Hitchcock on April 19, 2008.