

## LA Times

### **Snake in the Grass**

*The chilling thriller weaves comedy, ghost story and psychodrama, and it catches the audience unaware.*

By David C. Nichols

April 12, 2008

The devilish twists of the mystery genre recoil with agile wit in "Snake in the Grass." Every time it seems about to strike its foreseeable points, Alan Ayckbourn's 2002 dark comic thriller slithers past our expectations.

In this expertly appointed U.S. premiere by Salem K Theatre Company, director Mark Rosenblatt and three actresses sink their fangs into the reversals with venomous finesse.

Annabel Chester (Pamela Salem) returns to the girlhood home she fled 35 years ago, its sole inheritor after her father's death. A tightly wound pragmatist, Annabel would sell the place and retrench but for two obstacles: Miriam (Claire Jacobs), the oddball younger sister she abandoned, and Alice Moody (Nicola Bertram), who has a letter from Daddy that indicates his passing involved foul play.

Further details would only poison enjoyment of Ayckbourn's construct, which never goes where you know it's heading when you think it will. Intertwining comedy, ghost story and psychodrama, Ayckbourn unearths humor and chills, and Rosenblatt's staging maintains the moody tone.

Set designer Laura Fine Hawkes provides a wonderfully morbid garden, and May Routh's costumes make telling statements. Leigh Allen's lighting charts time with painstaking subtlety, particularly her handling of the blacked-out Act 2, and sound designer Eric Snodgrass and composer Hal Lindes offer apt atmosphere.

The cast catches us unaware even when it is clearly setting us up. Salem carries a damaged humanity beneath Annabel's clipped exterior that counters Jacobs' mercurial

Miriam. "Snake" is nothing extraordinary. Ayckbourn devotees might consider it slumming. But just try to avoid its insidious bite.