

Variety

Snake in the Grass

By BOB VERINI

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Pamela Salem, left, Claire Jacobs and Nicola Bertram star in Alan Ayckbourn's 'Snake in the Grass' at the Matrix Theater.

A Salem K Theater Company presentation of a play in two acts by Alan Ayckbourn. Directed by Mark Rosenblatt.

Alice Moody - Nicola Bertram
Miriam Chester - Claire Jacobs
Annabel Chester - Pamela Salem

Alan Ayckbourn, master craftsman of acerbic British comedy who unaccountably has never quite caught on here in the States, ventured into the dramatized ghost story genre first with "Haunting Julia" and later with "Snake in the Grass," the latter now enjoying its U.S. premiere in a stylish mounting by the Salem K Theater Company. The dramatist injects just enough characteristic humor to lull us into a false sense of security before the thriller dimension takes over.

Sibs out of sorts are a classic Ayckbourn trope. Thirty years ago, worldly career woman Annabel (Pamela Salem) traveled halfway across the world to escape her father's tyrannical clutches, and only his death would prompt her return. (It has.) By contrast, her mousy sister Miriam (Claire Jacobs), having sacrificed her life in father's care, now paddles about the family manse in an ill-fitting jumper, loveless and purposeless. Ayckbourn skillfully subverts stereotype within the familiar conflict. Annabel's in ill health and still suffering the stings of an abusive marriage, and her self-command proves only skin deep. Meanwhile, timorous Miriam has developed surprising backbone -- a handy quality when father's nurse Alice (Nicola Bertram) arrives to demand a king's ransom in exchange for her silence on the matter of the poison -- and Miriam's shove at the top of the stairs -- which, she's prepared to testify, sent dad to his doom.

Of course dad hovers nearby, for a good ghost story demands that the departed be present in life before we encounter him in spirit. Ayckbourn's celebrated ability to create absent characters in his comic works serves him well in evoking Father Chester in all his narcissistic, bullying glory. We can readily believe the stage was set for bad, bad things many years ago, a mood reinforced by Laura Fine Hawkes' brilliantly detailed set, the leaf-swept stone pathway, dilapidated summerhouse and untended tennis court wordlessly expressing pain and loss.

In the here and now, there's bubbly humor in Miriam's brisk readiness to send Nurse Moody whither the old man molders. But Leigh Allen's spectacularly spooky lighting and Hal Lindes' moody jazz themes warn us long in advance of this thriller's supernatural destination, and the U.K.-bred ensemble's authenticity of speech and manner is complemented by their skill in turning on a dime from hilarity to horror.

To reveal more would be churlish. Suffice it to say that Mark Rosenblatt's direction takes pains to ratchet up the hackle-raising suspense, at the expense of some jump-out-of-your-seat moments script specifies but production doesn't quite deliver. Still, "Snake in the Grass" winds up as deliciously creepy as its titular reptile.

Sets, Laura Fine Hawkes; costumes, May Routh; lighting, Leigh Allen; sound, Eric Snodgrass; composer, Hal Lindes; production stage manager, Young Ji. Opened April 4, 2008. Reviewed April 6. Runs through May 4. Running time: 1 HOUR, 40 MIN.