

STAGE

PLAYWRIGHT ISRAEL HOROVITZ BRINGS HIS STORY OF ART AND OBSESSION TO RICHMOND AND THE ACTORS AT THE FIREHOUSE THEATRE REVEAL "THE SECRET OF MME. BONNARD'S BATH"

IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE. **By Daryl Grove**

Bath Time



Scott Wichmann and Rusty Wilson star in the Firehouse Theatre's production of "The Secret of Mme. Bonnard's Bath."

There's also a video screen center stage, usually displaying a relevant Bonnard painting so we can see and study the image in question. It's like a progressive, avant garde, art history class, only with no test at the end. Even better, every costume used in the play is arranged on an eerie row of mannequins located up stage. Various costumes and garments hint at what's to come, but because we don't know which character will be wearing what (the wedding veil for example) nothing is given away.

Attentive art history students and people more knowledgeable and/or better educated than myself may already know why French painter Pierre Bonnard painted his wife in the bath nearly 400 times. But for those who don't, Firehouse Theatre's "The Secret of Mme. Bonnard's Bath" by Israel Horowitz will reveal the reasons behind Bonnard's strange compulsion.

Horowitz unravels the mystery by jumping back and forth between various periods and locations in France, with three actors filling eleven parts. Scott Wichmann stands out in five different roles, including two generations of a comical security guard, Bonnard's art dealer Vollard, Bonnard's contemporary Toulouse-Lautrec, Bonnard's young lover's father and French art student Luc.

Wichmann doesn't miss a beat as the play flits between time periods and characters, swiftly donning a beard for the lively Vollard or a grabbing a textbook for lovelorn student Luc and inhabiting each new character immediately and convincingly. Five roles sounds like a heavy workload but Wichmann recently juggled 35 in "I Am My Own Wife" so "Mme. Bonnard's Bath" is almost a vacation.

Just as impressive, Jennifer Massey plays Luc's fellow student Aurelie, Bonnard's three lovers Marthe, Chaty and Lucienne, and also narrates the play for us. The on-stage narration is a brave move that Horowitz, Massey and director Kenneth Cahall pull off with confidence to spare. Massey frequently sets the scene for us by giving the date, location and a little background information. One swift shift in the lighting later and the scene is underway, with Massey switching into character on the spot.

In this way the rapid fire short scenes flow into one other and it's exhilarating to see a play that moves so quickly. With an ever present easel stage right and a comfy looking chaise lounge stage left, there are almost no scenery changes required (just a small coffee table that's briefly dragged on, then off) and the static stage is ingeniously, convincingly used as multiple locations.

And then there's the nakedness. Once as Bonnard's model Lucienne and twice in the bath, Massey is 100% naked on stage (unless wigs count). It's tastefully done, and the slight sense of awkwardness the first time the actress appears sans clothes feeds into Lucienne's self-consciousness at posing for the first time.

But what lets "The Secret Of Mme. Bonnard's Bath" down is Bonnard himself. It's not all Rusty Wilson's fault, though he lacks the livewire energy Wichmann and Massey bring to their roles. It's more that Bonnard isn't a very sympathetic central character.

He seems like a great eccentric when we first meet him. Depicting the real event that inspired Horowitz to write "Mme. Bonnard's Bath" the artist enters a gallery, takes out his brush and begins to alter his own painting. When Wichmann's security guard challenges him Bonnard points to the video screen image of the real Bonnard and explains "look, it's me." But after this early high point he's interminably ponderous about life, about art and about relationships, creating his own problems by cowardly refusing to choose between women and damning the easy flow we enjoy in other scenes.

Worst of all, when the tragic secret to his obsessive bath paintings is finally revealed, the play demands Wilson deliver Bonnard's screams of anguish in French, and so a scene that should chill to the bone is rendered slightly farcical.

In a talkback session after the performance, Horowitz revealed that he workshoped the play in France, where a more historically faithful Bonnard was demanded. The result was that much of Bonnard's more entertaining dialogue was either removed or transferred to other characters (Wichmann seems to be the chief beneficiary, getting all the best lines). It's a shame Horowitz listened because that central personality void takes the heart out of an otherwise fantastic bit of theatre.

"The Secret of Mme. Bonnard's Bath" is running at the Firehouse Theatre through November 25. For ticket and show information call 355.2001 or visit www.firehousetheatre.org