

## The Real Inspector Hound

By Tom Stoppard. Directed by John Paterson. Coproduced by Esdecy Arts and Presentation House Theatre.

At Presentation House until January 25

• **By COLIN THOMAS**

Nobody builds a theatrical puzzle the way Tom Stoppard does; like the artist M. C. Escher, the guy's a genius of playful form. And this broadly stylized, mostly amateur production romps up and down Stoppard's Escher-like staircases

with wild abandon. One could argue that the actors' abandon is a bit *too* wild, but I'm not about to.

As is his habit, Stoppard plays with the conventions of theatre in *The Real Inspector Hound*—which he wrote in the '60s—calling into question the notions of illusion and reality.

In *Hound*, two critics watch an Agatha Christie-style whodunit. Though married, Birdboot has been lusting after the production's ingenue, and when the leading lady appears, his libidinous attentions immediately turn to her. The other critic, a pseudo-intellectual second-stringer named Moon, fantasizes about replacing—and, if necessary, murdering—Higgs, the first-string critic for his paper. As they get sucked into the action of the play, their obsessions return to haunt them.

The script works on several delicious levels. Stoppard lampoons the critics. When a new character enters, Moon goes into theoretical overdrive, noting "the impact of the catalytic figure, the outsider". Stop-

pard also sends up Christie's creaky conventions, especially her methods of exposition. The first time the maid, Mrs. Drudge, answers the phone, she sets the entire scene and fills in the back story of the long-lost Lord Muldoon almost before she says "hello". The second time she picks up the receiver, she says, "The same, half an hour later."

The real theatrical thrills, though, come from Stoppard's mastery of form. After we've watched two scenes from the interior play, they repeat with the critics having been lured into playing major roles. The characters from the interior play repeat their lines, which match perfectly with the critics' desires and protestations.

To say that John Paterson directs with verve would be an understatement; his supercharged ensemble executes whiplash-inducing triple takes. I ran into some smart friends on opening night who wanted the interior play to be performed more in the elusive half-camp, half-naturalistic style in which Christie wrote. But I think Paterson's decision to go for a more energetic interpretation is perfectly justified. *The Real Inspector Hound* is a farce, after all; you don't have to look any further than the absurdity of the improvised card games the characters play to realize that.

David C. Jones, the only Equity performer in this production, is in his element as Moon; he could find more rhythmic variety in his character's early speeches, but later on, comic business flies off him like sparks from a Catherine wheel. Jesse Clark, Denise Jones, Eden Parker, and Jeffrey Leigh Fisher all throw themselves wholeheartedly and wittily into the stereotypical characters of the interior play. Peter Abrams is less successful; he sports an all-purpose British/Australian/South African accent as the investigator, *Inspector Hound*. And director Paterson and performer Leanne Koehn, who plays Mrs. Drudge, fail to fully capitalize on the laughs to be wrung out of Christie's elitist class stereotypes. In the early going on opening night, Tristan Ham, who takes the role of Birdboot, spent too much time on one apoplectic note—and I could swear he was juggling some lines—but he settled down nicely.

This production of *The Real Inspector Hound* is smart fun, admirable post-holiday entertainment. ■