

An Existential Experience, Well Acted

By MARILYN J. ROWLAND

"No Exit," Jean-Paul Sartre's existential play about three people locked together in a small, spare room, for all eternity, confronted by each other, and by themselves, is surprisingly humorous and engaging as presented by the Theater Under the Stairs in the Cotuit Center for the Arts' new Black Box theater.

Directed by Christopher Compton, the play is set in hell, furnished in Second Empire style, and the audience, limited to 25 people, sits in a single row of chairs around the perimeter of the room, all the better to experience the claustrophobia, the paranoia, and the gradual revealing of each person's secret reasons for why they have been banished to this room, where "hell is other people."

It is not as grim as it sounds, though, and sitting right "on stage" with the actors does have its pluses. No one blocks your view, and you can hear every word of this highly regarded classic. The actors never make eye contact with the audience, and the illusion that we are watching from just outside hell prevails; the audience on opening night seemed to be enjoying their perspective, fully involved in the story, but not tormented.

The actors are everything in this play, where the set consists of three small sofas, a table, and a hideous bronze sculpture. And the actors are excellent, each of them infusing their character with a distinctive, believable, multi-faceted personality, as they interact with each other, and alliances are momentarily built, shifted, and collapsed.

Rob Anderson plays Joseph Garcin, a self-absorbed journalist from Rio, who complains about the style of the furniture and discovers that the room contains no mirrors, no windows, no human dignity—and he does not even get a toothbrush. Mr. Anderson does a fine job establishing his character and gradually revealing the reasons he is in hell. He is conflicted and needs the assurance of others that he was not a coward in life.

Susan Winslow is Inez Serrano, a hard, hostile lesbian postal clerk from Paris; she is the one who pushes the other two to talk about why they are there, insisting on honesty, and yet doing what she can to manipulate the others. She is the first to realize that the three were not put together by chance, but for a reason. Ms. Winslow is charming as she tries to seduce another character, and ruthless as she realizes her power over them.

Holly Erin McCarthy (who is also a co-director

of Theater Under the Stairs), is Estelle Rigault, a wealthy, somewhat ditzzy, socialite housewife from Paris who married an older man for his money. She insists that a mistake has been made; she did nothing wrong. Ms. McCarthy, who reminded me a bit of Bette Midler, is bubbly and helpless in the beginning, when Estelle's only wish is a mirror so she could put her lipstick on properly. She suggests that they use the word "absent" rather than dead. As we learn the nature of her wrongdoings, though, we realize she is anything but helpless, and Ms. McCarthy does a fine job of showing Estelle's different personas.

Stephen Coltin plays the valet, who brings each of the characters, one at a time, into the room, where he disabuses them of the notion of hell being medieval torture devices. There is no fire and brimstone here, just rooms and passages. The valet reveals that when he has a day off, he goes to his uncle's place (he's the head valet) on the third floor.

The three main characters are initially aware of what their living friends and acquaintances are doing and talking about after their deaths, and they strain to find out what their friends really thought of them and what they are doing now. Gradually, though, their connections to the living fade, and they are left with only each other, and eternity.

There are many satisfying little touches in Mr. Compton's production: the footfalls we hear from outside the room, as each character is brought into the room; the precisely placed pillow; and the dimming of lights when the door to the rest of hell is opened.

One can enjoy this play on many levels. It is said that "No Exit," which was written in 1944 and first performed just before the liberation of Paris, is about the French Resistance during World War II, that it is Sartre's clearest declaration of the philosophy of existentialism, which, simplistically described, is the study of the individual separate from the influences of the world. There is much to think about. Or not. One can also enjoy this fine play for its wonderful characters and creative presentation.

"No Exit" is at the CCftA's Black Box theater through February 20. Performances are Friday and Saturday at 8 PM and Sunday at 2 PM. The theater is at 4404 Route 28 in Cotuit. Tickets are \$10. Seating is limited, and reservations may be made by calling 508-428-0669 or visiting www.artsonthecape.com.