

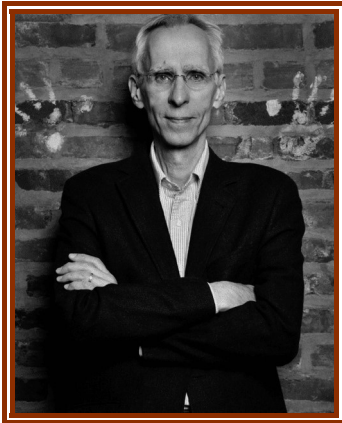
Williamstown Theatre Festival, Williamstown, MA
Pamela Palmer by David Ives. Directed by Walter Bobbie.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“It isn’t really a case.”

Pamela Palmer (Tina Benko*) tries to hire a recently famous detective (Clark Gregg*) to investigate her activities and discover what she has done and to whom she has done it, whatever it is, without letting her husband (Max Gordon Moore*) know what’s going on. She also doesn’t want her mother (Becky Ann Baker*) to know anything about what had been happening to her.

This mystery play, a ninety minute one-act, is constructed in classic three act format with a perfect second act closer that both startles and confuses us. Its third “act” takes us to a very different set-up which also is confusing. This is an almost perfect mystery play except that the mystery doesn’t actually exist and what follows the mysterious introduction to it all is more a mystery than the mystery itself which Pamela later confesses wasn’t a real mystery.

The real mystery, to me, is why the very wealthy Pamela Palmer only wears one dress for the entire play. Does she conceivably have no other clothing? Is she afraid she won’t be recognized in another dress? Is she so attached to this particular look that she cannot tolerate the concept of changing her look? What is the megalomaniac decision here? Is this part of David Ives’ concept for this play and if so, why?



David Ives

Ives is a quirky playwright. His work is generally comic, but not always. His play “Venus in Fur” was a major Broadway hit with many regional productions to follow. He has collaborated with Stephen Sondheim on his final show, “Here We Are,” and with others as well. In collaboration with the New York producing company, Primary Stages, he created and presented many fine short works. This play fits into the concept of a David Ives play but is different from so many of its predecessors.

Tina Benko is excellent as Pamela Palmer, nervous, shaky, definite and morose in turns. Her character drives the play from deep inside of it. She is the masked motorman in a Rose Parade float making her difficult turn from one road to another without mis-gauging the angle. It is a performance hard to forget and I know I won’t get it out of my mind for a long while.

As the bemused, if confused, detective, Clark Gregg takes on Ives’ strange dialogue with great certainty. He plays off-hand love scenes brilliantly and well-controlled professional moments with an irregular verbiage that smacks of insolence. I truly enjoyed his work in this play; he kept it grounded and real in even its most absurd moments.

Max Gordon Moore is a delight as Pamela’s confused husband, a man so devoted to his

wife that he actually senses her moods and emotions and, when confronted with her confused reality, manages to wreak revenge on her imagined infidelity. It is a dynamic and revealing performance which I celebrate.

It is Becky Ann Baker's portrayal of Pamela's mother that ties up loose ends and convoluted history and yet tells us very little about the heroine. Her relationship on stage with Benko is fascinating and her final scene is devastating.

Director Walter Bobbie creates an excellent pas de deux for Pamela and the Detective in act one and a subtle, if negative variation in act three. As they move around one another the odd eroticism of Ives' play emerges onto the stage in almosy hypnotic fashion. Throughout the play he maneuvers the characters around the three-quarter thrust stage set in dance fashion that seems very right for this piece.

The set itself is handsome, although cumbersome the way a wealthy man's favorite room might well be designed. The set has been created by Alexander Woodward. The costumes are by Amanda Roberge, and the lighting has been designed by Landon K. Elder.

The play ends as it must, perfectly. I have no quibble with that, but Ives then returns us the opening sequence which seems unnecessary and weird. It is just one more mystery, not to be easily solved.

+ 07/28/2024 +

Pamela Palmer (a world premiere) plays on the Center Stage in the 62 Center for Dance and Theatre at Williams College through Auust 10. For information and tickets go to wtfestival.org or call (413) 458-3200.