

THE PETRIFIED FOREST

THE PETRIFIED FOREST Several performers stand out in Jemal McNeil's straightforward staging of Robert Sherwood's 1935 hostage drama. Rico Simonini is excellent as Alan Squier, a penniless drifter who stumbles into a Depression-era Black Mesa, Arizona, diner/gas station. A former gigolo and failed writer, Alan ignites long-simmering passions in Gabby (Mary Carrig), a waitress who dreams of studying art in Paris. When murderous bank robber Duke Mantee (Billy Aklū) and his gang take the occupants of the diner hostage, Alan sees a chance to help Gabby fulfill her dream. Simonini's compelling performance holds the production together. George Alvarez is appropriately menacing as Duke's main henchman, and Carmine Puccio and Brian Veronica are fine as supporting hoodlums. Ken Bernfield garners laughs as the boastful, miserly grandfather. The ensemble, however, is somewhat uneven. McNeil keeps the action moving at a brisk clip. Coleman and Smith Artistic Company, 6902 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 & 7 p.m.; thru Aug. 1. (323) 467-1599. **Written 07/22/2004** (Sandra Ross)

SUMMER BRAVE

Recommended

Talk about perfectionism — William Inge rewrote his own Pulitzer Prize-winning *Picnic* and came up with this play. According to Inge's preface, he found this version more "humorously true" to his original intentions. Gordon D. Pinkney's sensitive direction, with its mixture of gentle comedy and ungentle passion, honors Inge's vision of the hot blood pulsing behind the placid façade of 1950s America. The story follows a pair of sisters, pretty Madge (Shannan Leigh) and smart Millie (Charlie Shannon), as they prepare for a Labor Day weekend picnic with family and friends. Both girls are tired of their given roles, wanting to be more than just pretty or just smart, and the unexpected arrival of good-looking bad boy Hal (Rico Simonini) lights a flame under them both. Leigh impresses with a nicely calibrated performance that calmly captures a role that could dissolve into histrionics in lesser hands. Shannon is genuinely moving as the vulnerable Millie, and a scene where her date at a dance gradually shifts his interest to the "pretty" sister is an effective study of quiet heartbreak. Simonini effectively exposes the desperation beneath Hal's casual opportunism, but is best when he turns on the whole group like a wounded animal. Ellen Buckley is dramatically strong as "old maid" schoolteacher Rosemary, and Chris Hill appeals as hapless good guy Alan. Coleman and Smith Artistic Company at the Working Stage Theater, 1516 N. Gardner St., Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru Nov. 22. (213) 202-3235. (Terry Morgan) Note: The production is double cast. **Written 11/13/2003** (Terry Morgan)

GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS

This puzzling amalgam of David Mamet's Pulitzer Prize-winning play and its screen adaptation begins with a scene from the film in which a slick ball-buster from headquarters (played by director Kenneth Foster) unloads a searing tirade on a crew of small-time real estate hucksters. Foster plays the scene like he's alone on stage. As star salesman Richard Roma, Rico Simonini gives the most dynamic performance of the evening, stealing every scene that he's in. Though he's about 20 years too young to play the role of careworn sales veteran George Aaronow, Ben Alexander parlays what first reads as actor's nervousness into a compelling character. Ken Bernfield is serviceable as squirming, hot-shot-in-decline Shelly Levene, but falls victim to Foster's listless pacing. COLSAC at the Working Stage Theater, 1516 N. Gardner St., Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru Jan. 18. (213) 202-3235. **Written 01/15/04** (Anne Kelly-Saxenmeyer)

HEAVEN CAN WAIT

Recommended

Joe Pendleton, an up-and-coming boxer from New Joysey, finds his soul has been snatched 60 years too soon by an overzealous Heavenly Messenger (Gwen Copeland). But now this mug is back, and he's upset. His body has been cremated, and it's up to Mr. Jordan (Amos Cowson) to find him another. Screenwriter Harry Segall won a 1941 Academy Award for penning *Here Comes Mr. Jordan*, the movie adaptation of his play. A 1978 adaptation, starring Warren Beatty, was also made. Now director Sherry Coon revives this delightful comedy/fantasy/morality play with outstanding performances by several of its principals — Rico Simonini as the good-natured boxer, for example. And the comic timing is priceless between Simonini and Warren Steinman, playing Pendleton's former manager with gusto. Stephen Schilling and understudy Elizabeth Pan are similarly excellent. There are some wobbly notes, however, in the form of some grating performances, but not enough to mute the evening's charm. Theater Palisades, 941 Temescal Canyon Road, Pacific Palisades; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m. (no perf Dec. 14); thru Dec. 16. (310) 454-1970. **Written 12/5/01** (Jim Crogan)

Glengarry Glen Ross

by Brandon Burkhart

Working in sales can be extremely stressful, especially when the “product” is shady Florida real estate. In *Glengarry Glen Ross*, playwright David Mamet places four high-strung salesmen on the edge of either getting rich or getting fired and uses the ensuing fireworks to illustrate how the American dream can become a nightmare. Happily, the Coleman & Smith Artistic Company is currently reviving Mamet's Pulitzer Prize winning masterpiece at the Working Stage Theatre in West Hollywood. In the opening scene, the fast-talking, foul-mouthed, and cruelly hilarious tone is set by Blake (Kenneth Foster, who also directed), a corporate shill sent from the head office to whip the lagging sales staff into shape. He questions their manhood and tells everyone that they're fired unless they can prove themselves in a week. The old has-been Levine (Ken Bernfield), the gullible neurotic Aaronow (Ben Alexander), the manipulative cynic Moss (Randy Robertson) and the charismatic golden boy Roma (**Rico Simonini**) pace their shabby office like hungry lions, turning their rage on each other, their potential clients, and their office manager (Phil Selvey). What makes this ultimately depressing morality tale fun to watch is Mamet's vibrant writing. *Glengarry* is an actor's dream, an ensemble piece in which every cast member has a showcase moment and the rhythm of the dialogue gives them plenty of ammunition. Like Shakespearean cadences, Mamet-speak will bring out great acting if it's handled correctly, but if it's done in a sloppy way, it quickly dissolves into a phony-sounding self-parody. As a whole, the cast is able to pull off this balancing act.

In the first act, the pace lags a bit, but luckily **Simonini** takes the stage in time to save things. His charisma makes Roma's every move riveting. Foster's direction comes into sharper focus in the second act, as dramatic bombshells explode and the tension becomes unbearable. Bernfield makes Levine's heartbreak devastatingly palpable, and Selvey shows that his character has depths that were only hinted at earlier.

RECOMMENDED