

By Bob Hoover

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Years ago, one ticket would get you in to both games of a Pirates doubleheader. Not anymore, unfortunately.

It's the same deal with the Pittsburgh Irish & Classical Theatre's current production(s), a drama doubleheader of sorts — two plays linked to each other and playing simultaneously with one cast at the twin theaters in the Stephen Foster Memorial. Separate tickets required for each.

This exercise in aerobic theatrics was devised by Britain's Alan Ayckbourn who apparently wasn't content to see only one of his 75 plays on stage at a time. The playwright, whose clever artifice is exceeded only by his dramatic output, constructed a pair of 2-hour-40-minute plays timed to allow the cast of 14 adults and eight children to move from the "House" to the "Garden" without overlap.

Staging them requires the logistical expertise of the D-Day Landings and the talented PICT production crew headed by directors Andrew

Paul ("House") and Melissa Hill Grande ("Garden") manage the difficult task with impressive — and entertaining — results.

They should thank the hard-working cast for pulling off the fiendish details of the twin bill with only a few bumps and pauses. Nobody stopped to ask, "Where the hell am I?" as they dashed upstairs and down between an elegant English country house and its grassy garden and back again.

The reasons for these dashes were the various collapses of three marriages and the budding of perhaps two romances during a busy Saturday at the baronial manor of Teddy and Trish Platt and their 17-year-old daughter, Sally.

The Platts are throwing their annual "fete" for the village folk in their garden and have acquired the presence of a French film actress named Lucille Cadeau (Nike Doukas) to kick off the fun. I should mention that Allison Scarlet Jaye manages both credible French and English accents as Lucille's aide, a role however that is largely extraneous.

The Platts' marriage is on rocky shoals because insuffer-

able bore Teddy, played with his familiar manic energy by Martin Giles, is having an affair with the couple's close friend, Joanna Mace (Beth Hylton).

Only the clueless, naive Giles Mace, a very sympathetic David Bryan Jackson, is in the dark even though his distracted son, Jake (Sean Mellott) knows along with the rest of the village what's going on. But he doesn't mind; he's only interested in Sally, an earnest Anwen Darcy as the overconfident overachiever of the Platt family.

Helena Ruoti, playing the long-suffering Trish with understated elegance and patience, is the one center of calm in "House" as the storm clouds (real and figurative) gather over the Platt estate.

She simply decides her worthless husband doesn't exist despite his annoying presence, a smart touch of humor to a play which begins with laughs and dissolves into soap opera cliches and moralizing.

"Garden," though, is funny throughout, a combination of classical farce, physical humor and cute little kids dancing around a maypole. The cast

seen most frequently here is a modern version of Shakespeare's "rustics":

Mary Rawson as Izzie, the malaprop-spouting housekeeper, Jon Farris, the ancient gardener of few words, most of them profane, and the fete organizers Lindy and Barry Love (Tressa Glover and Michael Fuller), who all display a fine comedic touch.

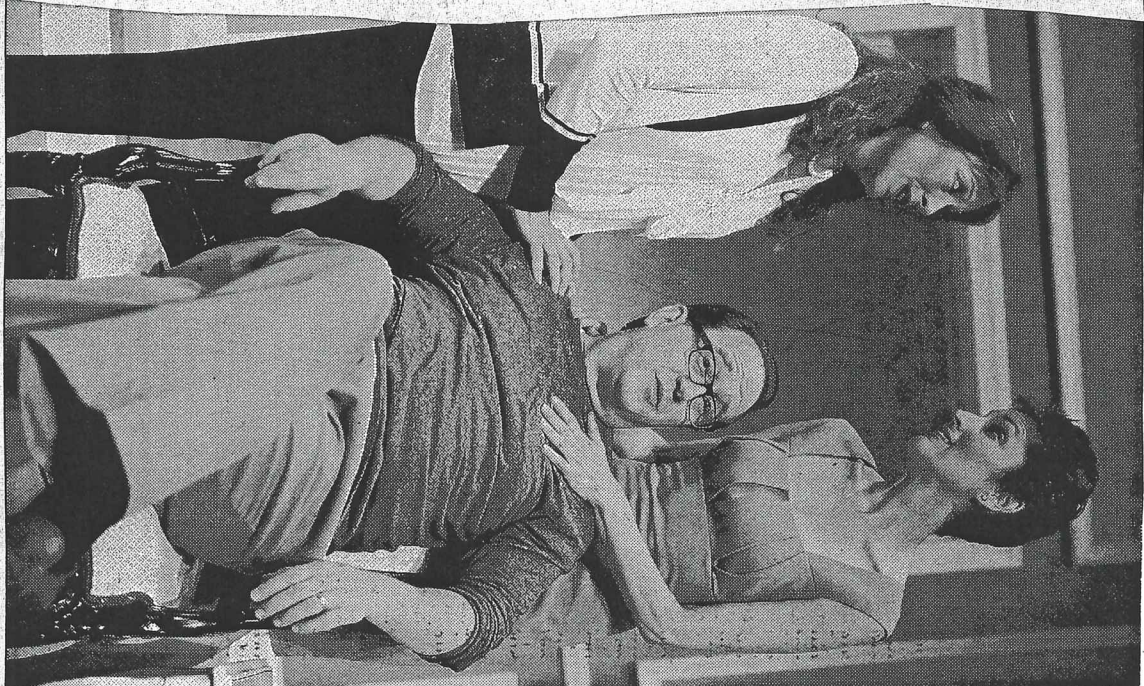
This play is the story of the Maces' estrangement, Mr. Jackson in Morris Dance regalia and Ms. Hylton hiding in the shrubbery from her devastated husband. Like Ms. Ruoti in "House," the Giles character holds center stage in "Garden," in spite of the collapse of the Loves' relationship and the collapse of a tent where two lovers are hard at it.

Only the promise of something stirring with Izzie's randy daughter Pearl, the perky navel-baring Sarah Manton, cheers Giles, since she does have a thing for older men, really older men.

Surveying all of this destruction is visitor Gavin Ryng-Mayne, who's arrived to lure Teddy into local politics. Looking much like a serpent in a tight-fitting suit, Leo Marks

'Garden' outshines 'House' in farcical PICT doubleheader.

Martin Giles plays Teddy Platt with Helena Ruoti, left, as Trish Platt and Nike Doukas as Lucille Cadeau in "House."



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provides a cool, sardonic detachment to the antics of these fools.

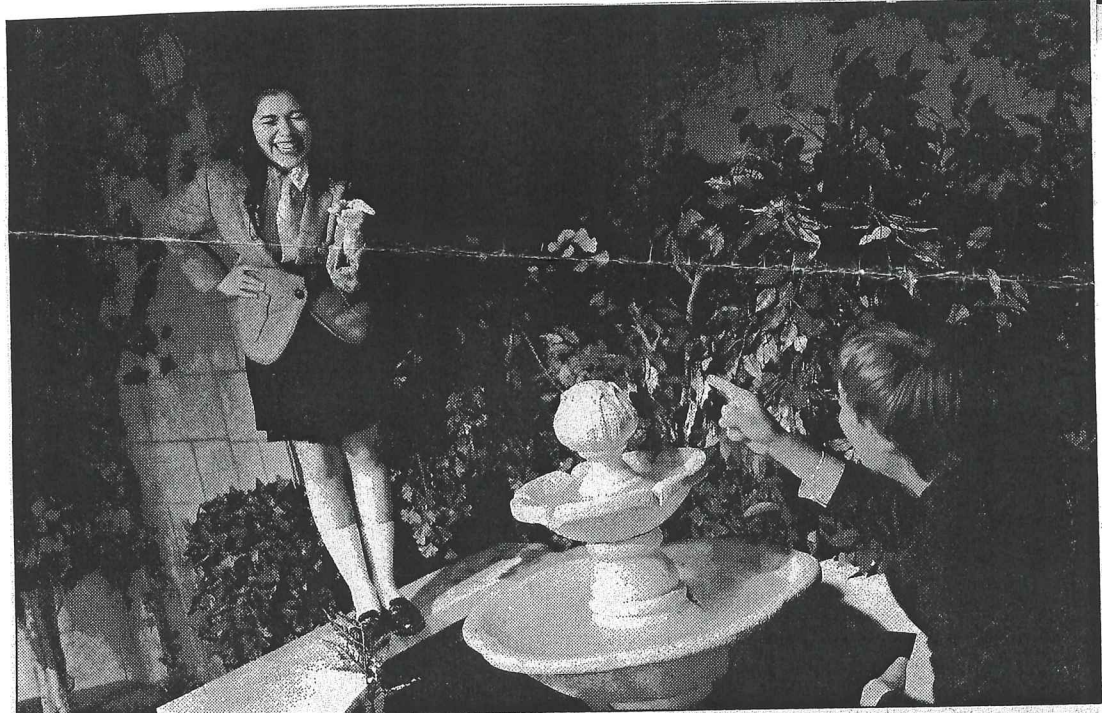
The technical and physical accomplishments displayed by the PICT troupe is further proof — as if we needed it — that the city is blessed with a deep theatrical presence.

"House" and "Garden" though, are not remarkable, interesting or challenging. Mr. Ayckbourn's cynical view of marriage, which he clumsily tries to soften with Hallmark Card sentimentality, creates an arid landscape that only a true cynic like his Ryng-Mayne character could love.

Then, there is the hodgepodge of faux British accents that the many American actors bring to these plays. Nobody sounds alike. Even Henry Higgins would be at a loss to pinpoint the regional origin of these speakers.

If you can only afford to see one of the PICT productions, see "Garden," but be sure to pop upstairs during intermission for a peek at Gianni Downs' lovely design of the Platt's house.

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Michael Henninger/Post-Gazette photos

Anwen Darcy as Sally Platt and Sean Mellott as Jake Mace in "Garden."