

Arts & Culture

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Performance

A seriously funny look at the human, not-so-human condition

By David Cannon
Sentinel Arts Critic

Seascape is a simple enough story – two couples meet on a beach. Both couples have issues and initially mistrust each other but learn to be friends. One couple, Nancy and Charlie, are a middle-aged couple going through a bumpy period in their marriage. The other couple, Leslie and Sarah, are lizards. Green, scaly and cold blooded and they lay eggs. Believe it or not, both couples have a lot in common.

Welcome to the strange but always fascinating world of Edward Albee, probably America's most important living playwright. One thing that most people forget, but the current production down at Silver Spring Stage smartly remembers, is that Albee's plays are quite funny. They are not Neil Simon comedies, but they are hardly all gloom and doom dramas either. *Seascape* may deal with serious issues – it earned Albee his second Pulitzer Prize – but often this play is just hilarious.

This is especially true in the second act when the two couples really go at it. Albee is a master of the Theater of the Absurd, which is not as esoteric as some people think. All the major issues in *Seascape* are common problems we all face. By having the second couple be talking lizards, one is forced to look at those issues a new way. How do you explain love to someone who lays hundreds of eggs at one time, or explain airplanes to something that lives most of its life underwater?

Director Laurie Freed has directed several



PHOTO BY NEIL EDGELL

Robin Covington and Brandon Mitchell as lizard couple in the odd-ball play *Seascape* by Edward Albee.

other Albee plays in the past and certainly has an understanding of his skewered world, both its humorous surface aspect and the more probing and serious undercurrents. Eric Scerbo's costumes do a great job turning two of the actors into maritime lizards, complete with tails and webbed hands. And Scott Bloom's sound design give us the ambient wash of a sea shore, occasionally broken by the howl of a crossing jet plane.

Plus the quartet of actors do a great job in these strange roles. Michelle Trout and Craig

Miller do a good job as the bickering human couple, so believable in the opening scene and then helping us all cross into that strange world later in the play. Brandon Mitchell and Robin Covington are also good as Leslie and Sarah. I have no idea how two lizards starting to evolve into land dwellers would really act, but Mitchell and Covington are quite believable in these roles.

I must admit that the middle of the first act gets a little slow – Nancy and Charlie go over their problems in some detail. That changes as

soon as the other couple arrives, and it doesn't slow down from there. Otherwise, Albee is smart enough not to overstay his quirky premise, as the whole play is less than two hours long, including intermission. But that is long enough, and this production is good enough that you accept Albee's oddball characters and situations as calmly as you would anything from Neil Simon.

One final note to ponder. Both the female characters seem to be the more adventurous and trusting of the couples – the men more defensive and reluctant to move forward. On top of everything else in this play about new ideas and midlife doubts, there are also themes about intolerance and overcoming one's biases. This is no doubt why *Seascape* won the Pulitzer Prize. Despite its oddball premise, its humorous episodes and fairly short running time, Albee packs a lot into this little work. And in its themes of relationships, it speaks a lot about human evolution, and not just the Charles Darwin kind.

Seascape continues at Silver Spring Stage through Feb. 3. For more information, call 301-594-6036 or visit their Web site at www.ssstage.org.

Seascape

★★★

Silver Spring Stage

Three isn't a crowd in *Music in the Mansion* series

By David Cannon
Sentinel Arts Critic

Even with all the events going on in the new Music Center, Strathmore is continuing its long running *Music in the Mansion* series with a diverse slate of programs in a more intimate setting.

To kick off the New Year was the National Philharmonic Piano Trio. Made up of members from the resident National Philharmonic, the trio last Saturday had a strong program that covered three centuries of chamber music, discussed the nature of musical prodigies and delved into one of the more contentious areas

of 20th century musical discussion.

From the 18th century came the final *Piano Trio* by Mozart. As noted in the opening remarks of cellist Lori Barnet, this G Major work is unrelentingly upbeat. From the joyful opening movement to the playful finale, this trio is as sunny a composition as one could imagine. Even when darker clouds appear, such as a minor key variation in the slow movement, it's only temporary and it's quickly brushed aside. All three performers made this work a delightful opening number.

For the 19th century and to conclude the concert was the Mendelssohn Piano Trio in c minor. As pianist Philip Hosford noted in his remarks, when one thinks of Mendelssohn, one thinks of sunny Italian Symphonies and *Midsummer Night's Dream* fairy music. That side of the composer was clearly evident in the slow movement and quicksilver scherzo of this trio.

But the opening movement is a turbulent and dramatic piece and the finale returns to that world before a familiar hymn tune finally takes

over. Rarely does Mendelssohn sound so much like Brahms as he does here. A good job by all three performers in a piece that more than once builds to climaxes that sound more like a miniature symphony than a typical chamber music piece.

Both Mendelssohn and Mozart were child prodigies and to a point so was Leonard Bernstein and shown by the final work on the program, Bernstein's youthful *Piano Trio*, written in his college years.

Bernstein still elicits heated discussion in musical circles – not as a conductor or a teacher, where he is an acknowledged master. Nor in his more popular works, where *West Side Story* and *On the Town* are acclaimed masterworks. But in his so-called "serious" works there are those who find his symphonies and chamber pieces – and even that large scale *Mass* that opened the Kennedy Center – to be either over-praised crazy quilts of styles or seriously underrated American masterworks.

As violinist Jody Gatwood noted in his re-

marks, the *Trio* is an even stranger work since it is one of Bernstein's earliest pieces. You will find a typically eclectic mix of styles here: severe counterpoint out of Hindemith, touches of Hebraic folk music, and a dreamy impressionism that reminds one of Debussy. But this *Trio* has few hints of the jazz and Broadway style music that Bernstein later become famous for.

Again well done by the group, who manage to shift musical styles quickly and easily. The Bernstein was a surprisingly serious work despite the playful musical games in the finale. It may take another generation before Bernstein's place as a serious composer can be fairly evaluated, but it is worth reviving this *Trio* simply to show another side of a composer we think we know all too well.

The *Music in the Mansion* series continues with classical pianist Dan Franklin Smith on Jan. 20, the Ron Kearns Jazz Quintet and the New Century Saxophone Quartet on April 17.

For more information, call 301-581-5100 or visit their Web site at www.strathmore.org.

Music in the Mansion

★★★

Strathmore Theater