



From left, Lane Luckert, Diane Grotke and James Walsh in 'The Baltimore Waltz,' Paula Vogel's AIDS allegory that won an Obie award in 1992

A Dreamy, Surreal Dance With Death

THE BALTIMORE WALTZ. Oddfellows Productions presents a play by Paula Vogel. With Diane Grotke, James Walsh and Lane Luckert. Directed by Maria Pessino. At Arlene Bujese Gallery, 66 Newtown Lane, East Hampton, through Aug. 20. Seen Saturday night.

By Steve Parks

STAFF WRITER

IT'S NO MISTAKE when Carl shows slides of Baltimore while describing his trip to Germany. You see, Carl never made it to Germany. He and his sister, the playwright Paula Vogel, had talked about traveling through Europe together. "Due to pressures of time and money," the author writes in her program notes, "I declined, never dreaming that he was HIV-positive."

After her brother died in 1988, Vogel took that trip with Carl in her imagination. "The Baltimore Waltz," which won the Obie for best Off-Broadway play in 1992, now receives a stark reprise, as directed by Oddfellows Productions' Maria Pessino, at the antiseptically white Arlene Bujese Gallery in East Hampton.

There's no mention of AIDS in the play. Instead, the author mocks the disease and turns the tables, making herself the terminal one while we share a good laugh about dying young. In "The Baltimore Waltz," Vogel changes her name to Anna, a first-grade schoolteacher who's contracted the deadly, incurable ATD — Acquired Toilet Disease.

It's funnier, somehow, to be dying of a disease you catch from toilet seats. After learning that "nothing can be done" — and conjugating the phrase in every possible permutation — Anna and her brother Carl head for Europe, clad throughout in a black nightgown and pajamas. The formerly virtuous schoolteacher has sex with every

bellhop and waiter on the continent, not to mention the all-grown-up little Dutch boy who stuck his thumb in the dike. The search for a cure — a mad urologist has a potion — takes them to Vienna, where Carl and his ubiquitous stuffed bunny are part of an intrigue that pays hilarious homage to the movie "The Third Man."

While it is somewhat distracting that scenes are changed right under our noses — the bed is shifted from one side of the narrow platform stage to the other, and lighting adjustments are made by replacing a lightbulb on the set — the result of this close-quarters scrambling is intimacy. When you can smell the players and hear the rustle of their nightclothes as they enter and exit the stage, it's as if the terminal patient is a lover or member of the family. And that's precisely what the playwright intended.

As Anna, Diane Grotke exudes defiance in her character's race to get a life before it's too late. But she allows her husky voice to crack and her eyes to well with tears, to let us know that Anna is afraid. James Walsh, as Carl, strikes an appropriate pose for a grown man who still sleeps with his stuffed bunny. And he can be so demonstratively wounded when his sister abandons him for another night of carnal revelry.

Lane Luckert, who plays all the other characters, from the Dutch boy to the Third Man to the mad urologist who has an undrinkable cure, camps it up with broad gestures and leers. Each of his characters seems progressively more surreal than the last — as if, appropriately, he were part of someone's dream.

It's Anna's dream. But in the end, of course, it's Carl's waltz. At least we get to know him a little in this up-close performance. ■