

# The Southampton Press

'Baltimore Waltz'

## Confusion, Rewards

By Lee Davis

To say that the plays of Paula Vogel resemble works by Nora Ephron with depth is in no way a diminishment, though it may be a key to the confusion that ripples through some audiences. The rewards and the confusion are both there in the present Odd Fellows production of Paula Vogel's Obie-winning "The Baltimore Waltz" at the Arlene Bujese Gallery in East Hampton.

It can be, admittedly, a little startling to face a stage thoroughly dominated by a hospital bed, know that a play is about AIDS, and then encounter characters spouting hilarious one liners.

This incongruity was one of the purposely disorienting elements in Ms. Vogel's "Desdemona," which glittered for a while at the Bay Street Theatre, then kicked around in anticipation of a New York opening. There, it was Shakespeare's characters spouting 1990s scatological repartee. Here, it's a brother and sister: he is dying of AIDS, she (with his help) is escaping into a fantasy of a trip to Europe in which roles and disease are reversed—or, more properly, twisted into odd and intriguing shapes.

In the fantasy, she, an elementary school teacher, has contracted ATD (Acquired Toilet Disease) a fairly common but terminal affliction contracted by elementary school teachers from toilet seats. She is lustily heterosexual—"Your hovel or my hotel?" she inquires of just about every waiter, busboy, bellhop or chance male acquaintance she encounters on their junket through Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin and Vienna, while he remains lonely, with only a stuffed rabbit for company.

She cavorts wildly through Europe and Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's six stages of preparation for death; she even invents and adds a seventh stage, lust, in which the body clings to its most spontaneous expression.

There are brilliant fireworks of comedy and satire in "The Baltimore Waltz"—it helps, for instance, to be a fan of Graham Greene and Carol Reed. Carl (the brother) has a Europe-dwelling college buddy named Harry Lyme, and Carl meets him on the top of a ferris wheel in Vienna. But the cotton clouds of comedy and the more substantial satire are always laced by the heat lightning of tragedy and reality, ripping away the fantasy and striking, sky to ground, at unexpected yet logical moments.

It's a tough assignment for actors, particularly since Paula Vogel, like most young playwrights weaned on television and film, constructs her play cinematically, with very, very short takes.

Where are—or are there any—new playwrights whose grounding is on the stage, where there is time to spend with people and scenes and ideas, and where the audience is eager to spend that time, and not at all enthralled with sound and sight bites?

Nevertheless, as usual, Maria Pessino has assembled a fine trio of actors, who make us care, and, with varying degrees of the success allowed by the playwright, form a continuity of character that bridges the staccato abruptness of the play's construction.

James Walsh's portrayal of Carl, the doomed brother, is appropriate and frequently touching, though Ms. Vogel gives him only a couple of strings upon which to play. Lane Luckert dashes through a bushel of characters, including doctors (both sane and insane), waiters, bellboys, customs inspectors, Harry Lyme and even the Dutch Boy, complete with paint bucket and thumb to stick in the

dike. He scarcely has time to change costume, much less establish character, but he does it with brio and zest and humor.

Anna, the sister, is the surrogate for the real Paula Vogel, who, in 1986, did not go on a real excursion that her brother Carl proposed, and who did—a year after his death from AIDS at Baltimore's Johns Hopkins Hospital—turn a fantasy journey with him into "The Baltimore Waltz." Diane Grotke invests the part with loving grace, leavening humor, and storehouses of conflicted emotion. It's a performance, the sort that makes the complex seem effortless.

Director/producer Maria Pessino has a knack for turning user-unfriendly places into playing spaces that work, and on seemingly rubber band budgets. This time, the budget shows through, in light changes that involve Ms. Pessino jumping onstage and changing light bulbs, and on a rickety hospital bed

(that had better not be authentically Johns Hopkins) being trundled from one side of the tiny stage to the other. But these Spartan production values continually fade from view in favor of the intense and sustained performances she draws from her actors and the flow of the evening she maintains.

"The Baltimore Waltz" is a sometimes hilarious, sometimes heart-wrenching and always entertaining fantasy, well presented by the talented and intriguing people of Odd Fellows Productions. It concludes this weekend, running Thursday through Sunday at 8 pm at the Arlene Bujese Gallery, 66 Newtown Lane in East Hampton. The box office number is 324-5797.



Lane Luckert and Diane Grotke in the Odd Fellows production of Paula Vogel's "The Baltimore Waltz."  
—Christine Newman Photo