

Speaking in Tongues bursts with intrigue



Photo by Shaun Benson

When a playwright mixes mystery with a clever and complex narrative structure, the resulting intrigue permeates the theatre space, seeping into whispered explanations in the row behind you and intermission pronouncements and predictions. Such is the flavour of Andrew Bovell's *Speaking in Tongues*, a highly intelligent thriller of a play, albeit one that leans heavily on coincidence to make sure everything's interconnected.

The Company Theatre has a knack for finding plays that place human nature under the microscope to examine the complex patterns of our behaviour — *Speaking in Tongues* fits the model. With two separate yet attached acts, it's a play that demands an energetic working out of storylines. The first act could stand as a play on its own, which makes the reset in the second seem a bit tacked on.

In the initial scene, two couples, Leon and Jane (Jonathan Goad and Helene Joy), and Peter and Sonja (Richard Clarkin and Yanna McIntosh), dance around a hotel room bed, each pairing on the precipice of an affair. In what proves to be one of Bovell's most effective conventions, the dialogue of the couples is mirrored, and it overlaps as each near-adulterer tries a new tactic. One couple is successful in committing the act, while the other breaks it off.

Not surprisingly, we find out that both couples are connected: Leon is married to Sonja and Jane is married to Peter. As their relationships quickly unravel, the characters and scenarios from their surrounding com-

munity become the subject of the second act. Here, the actors take on the roles of characters in the embedded storylines.

The narrative weaving is undeniably entertaining. As the web of interlocking stories reveal themselves, there is a pleasure that results from identifying connections and searching for the next point of intersection. The first act is certainly the strongest. There is such a distinct beginning, middle, and end, that it's hard to reinvest in the collection of second act characters.

Director Philip Riccio seems most at home choreographing the scenes with overlapping dialogue where all four characters converge. There are lulls, however, during the lengthy speeches from Goad and Joy as they introduce us to the characters that will inhabit the second act. Getting us to the next stage of the drama, which reaches beyond the couples of the first act, proves to be Riccio's difficult task.

Of the performers, all four stand up well, but it's McIntosh and Joy that continually pull our attention. McIntosh displays her versatility in the earthy, rooted Sonja, and as the shrill, hysterical Veronica. Joy, too, finds good range between the acts. There is something underwhelming in the set design from John Thompson that's salvaged by some fine lighting.

Go for the inventiveness of the first act — the mystery will draw you in.