

Speaking In Tongues

PLAYWRIGHT ANDREW BOVELL CREATES AN OFTEN FASCINATING DAISY CHAIN OF A MYSTERY FROM THE LIVES OF TROUBLED COUPLES



Speaking In Tongues is a puzzle of a play, intentionally.

Linking the lives of nine people, played by four actors, playwright Andrew Bovell begins with two couples: Leon (Jonathan Goad) and Sonja (Yanna McIntosh), and Pete (Richard Clarkin) and Jane (Hélène Joy). Their marriages have, for various reasons, become tedious and each person wants a rejuvenating passionate experience.

Ending up with each other's partners, the four find themselves in hotel rooms; one pair follows through with the adultery, one doesn't. This scene, the play's cleverest, is staged in a single room, with each couple unaware of the other. They share lines in a sometimes choral fashion, echoing each other or offering contradictory meanings using the same words.

It's followed by a series of guilty confessions and charged confrontations, as the four go through various pairings yet again as they play out their anxiety and hurt, the women more sensitive than the men to what's happened and more able to share their feelings.

The second half introduces another series of characters, some of whom are mentioned – seemingly tangentially – in the first. By play's end, we realize they're all part of Bovell's dexterously plotted tale.

Director Philip Riccio does a fine job of teasing out the links, especially with the tricky rhythms, overlapping lines and comic ironies of the hotel scene. The four actors bring just the right nuances to their roles, sometimes burying emotion and sometimes using it as a battering ram against their partner of the moment.

But the writing after intermission doesn't measure up to that in the first act. Here the mystery rather than the emotional lives of the characters is paramount; Bovell weaves the story cunningly, but the final surprise is predictable way before the end.

Even here, though, the performances are fine, with McIntosh as a troubled therapist whose distance from her clients is something more than a professional manner; Joy as an impassive, initially callous client, who wears a smile to cover up her fears; Goad stepping into the professional side of his character from the first act; and Clarkin as both a rejected lover and a concerned husband.

Despite the actors' strengths and good direction throughout, it's the first half that resonates with its poignant truths, sometimes suggested or half-voiced feelings about relationships, lies and infidelities. The second has the feel of a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces finally fit together in a way we admire, though the result doesn't really move us.