



High score

★★★★ (out of five)

By Jon Kaplan

Published November 10, 2011

There's a world of tension lurking beneath the often placid dialogue of *The Test*, an unsettling friction that makes for first-class theatre.

The Lukas Bärfuss play, presented by the Company Theatre and Canadian Stage, follows Peter (Gord Rand) as he tries to determine the paternity of his son. Has his wife Agnes (Liisa Repo-Martell) cheated on him and has he been showering his love on a bastard? The repulsive possibility can only be determined by a paternity test.

The idea of infidelity, planted by Franzeck (Philip Riccio), assistant to Peter's politician father Simon (Eric Peterson), grows to monstrous proportion, affecting all the characters, including Simon's cool wife Helle (Sonja Smits), who spends much of her time at an Indian ashram.

Director Jason Byrne keeps the dramatic stakes taut even in the most everyday conversation, and, at times, across the entire expanse of the wide Berkeley Street stage. His excellent cast knows how to suggest the anxiety that's not always in their characters' words, which are delivered in a low-key fashion. Though the pacing is occasionally too slow, we're always engrossed in the relationships.

"My life is a lie," says Peter matter-of-factly, but despite his calm exterior we sense the horrors that

eat away at him. After an opening speech filled with abusive language, Rand turns Peter's anger down to a carefully balanced simmer.

Ericson shows the politician's public smile, but we see his condescension and anger explode occasionally; this man's lost his previous campaigns but is determined, with Franzeck's help, to best his long-term rival. Smits floats calmly through most of her scenes, Helle's meditative philosophy informing her attitude, but every once in a while she shoots a painful, well-aimed dart in the direction of her family.

Repo-Martell's Agnes, emotionally the most tightly wound of the five characters, never enters without suggesting she's about to burst into either fury or tears. Her descent into desperation and numbness is fascinating to watch.

But it's Franzeck who is the most layered figure. The Iago of this tale, he's cool, ironic and manipulative, an easy character to dislike. Riccio, though, so subtly colours his actions with understandable psychological reasons that we become sympathetic toward this man who destroys the lives of everyone around him.

This is one *Test* that passes with flying colours.