

# A worthy test for viewers

★★★★ (out of four)

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Near the end of the first act of *The Test*, which opened Thursday night at the Berkeley St. Theatre, Eric Peterson complacently lowers his feet into what he thinks will be a soothing foot bath, only to find it a scalding inferno.

The scream he unleashes at that point is what you might expect from someone looking into the depths of hell.

That shock and that scream are both handy metaphors for the experience of watching this unconventional, but riveting play.

We're in the home of Simon Korach (Peterson), an aging German politician about to lose an election against the same opponent for the fifth time. But what grabs our attention at the play's beginning is a devastating monologue from his son, Peter (Gord Rand).

It seems that acting on the Iago-like suspicions planted in his brain by his father's confidant, Franzeck (Philip Riccio), he has matched DNA with his infant son through a mail-order paternity test and found he is not the father.

The catalogue of hatred and promises of revenge that come from Rand's mouth are frightening, but they're made even more chilling from the whispered offhand way he delivers them all.

We soon come to realize that's the style of performance that director Jason Byrne has guided his cast towards. The most horrible things will be discussed, revealed and acted on, but — with rare exceptions — it all happens in the most chillingly civilized tone of voice.

The objective correlative for this throughout the evening, is the brilliant soundscape of Richard Feren, with the most polite, bloodless music — classical and jazz — tinkling in the background, just barely audible.

I can't ever recall hearing such a mixed reaction from an audience: some guffawing with laughter at the blackness of the humour on display, others

puzzled as to just what they're meant to be feeling.

And I think that's wonderful. Too much of our theatre is spoon-fed and pre-digested. *The Test* makes you think on your feet, for yourself.

When Liisa Repo-Martell enters as the genetically unfaithful wife, she's a miracle of murmured asides, indirect glances and tentative gestures. Yet somehow, she conveys the perfect portrait of a woman on the edge in every sense.

Likewise, when the matriarch of the family, Sonja Smits, shows up when summoned from her Indian ashram, she floats around the edges of the set like someone who's there, but wishes she wasn't.

Add to this Riccio's wonderfully oleaginous anti-charm as the man who tries to help everything, Rand's brilliantly banked fires of belligerence and Peterson's wry disdain for everyone around him and you have a chamber quintet of artists all playing something as eerily threatening as Bartok in a minor key.

I found myself on the edge of my seat all through the first act, not daring to let my attention slip for a single second for fear I might miss just the revealing undertone that would bring the whole puzzle together.

The second act eases up a bit, or perhaps Byrne has too loose a hand on the reins, because when he should have been inevitably working towards the play's bizarre, yet somehow tragic climax, the tension flagged and so did my interest.

Still, there's no doubt that this should be on the must-see list for anyone who wants their theatre to upset and challenge, rather than to soothe and reassure.

Five great performances: no waiting.