

By Richard Ouzounian

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Debating domesticity and dalliances

ACTORS PAUL GROSS AND WIFE MARTHA BURNS TACKLE DARKLY COMEDIC ISSUES IN NEW PLAY



It's a scene we've all witnessed too many times in recent years: philandering politician, whose hand got caught in the sexual cookie jar, faces the media in front of a phalanx of microphones and cameras, while his long-suffering wife stands at his side, face set in a stoic grimace.

That's pretty much how Bruce Norris's bile-black comedy *Domesticated* begins, but if you drop by Canadian Stage's Berkeley Street Theatre you'll find two unique features about this show, co-produced with The Company Theatre.

First, the moment of *media mea culpa* doesn't play out quite the way the participants had hoped. Not at all.

Second, those participants (called Bill and Judy in the play) are being portrayed by real life husband and wife Paul Gross and Martha Burns, who've been together for more than three decades but haven't appeared onstage together since meeting in a play at the National Arts Centre (Walsh by Sharon Pollock) in 1983.

Burns recalls that they initially bonded by passing snappy notes to each other during rehearsal. The atmosphere hadn't changed 32 years later during a rehearsal break in Toronto.

Burns: We disagree quite a lot about what our characters represent in this play.

Gross: Well, it would be a pretty dreary evening if we concurred. I buy my character, Bill. He says a lot of unspeakable things, sure, but if you're unable to be honest in a conversation, then what's the point of that conversation?

Burns: There's no help for somebody like Bill, who's

stuck in a singular, immovable response. The character I play, Judy, is somebody I might not like in real life but, looking at all sides of the issue, I have to be on her side.

Gross: Bill has sex with a prostitute. It's immoral, but it's not illegal.

Burns: OK, it's legal for Bill to be with a prostitute, but that prostitute is wearing a schoolgirl's uniform. We have to struggle with what that means.

Gross: Look, the one unspeakable sexual act that anyone would condemn is pedophilia.

Burns: Damn right.

Gross: But if an adult person is dressed as a young girl or boy, is it that bad? How can you stop a sin of thought? Lord knows the Catholic Church tried to do so for years and failed.

Burns: The fact is that the reality of morality keeps shifting under everyone's feet. We're in the land of a million perspectives and the words we have to try to say what we mean just aren't adequate.

Gross: Eighty-five per cent of North American computers access pornography, but we still think it's a very bad thing if anyone gets caught doing it.

Burns: That's what bothers me about Bill's behaviour in the play. It's not doing something that's wrong; it's getting caught doing it.

Gross: I think if the media hadn't discovered him it would have all been a lot different.

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Burns: You do? I think we don't know the difference between public and private anymore. What is it we do to each other? What does society do to us? What do men need to do to get themselves under control?

Gross: The changing ground of our collectively agreed upon morality is also troubling. Look at Eliot Spitzer. He was caught going to a prostitute and brought down completely. Part of it was the offence, but part of it was because he was driving Wall Street insane.

Burns: But then look at Bill Clinton. He narrowly survived an impeachment and today he's the most popular politician in America.

Gross: Clinton's OK because everyone decided they liked that big cracker, that old dog.

Burns: Exactly. But Monica Lewinsky had this terrible time trying to redeem herself for her affair with Clinton and hasn't even really been able to have a life.

Gross: Over the years we've come to grudgingly accept that men are just bad and they're going to do bad things. But women are the repository of virtue.

Burns: Oh, I think we all have a more open, inquisitive attitude toward women and their sexuality than we did even a few years ago. If Judy had got caught in a situation similar to Bill, I think it would have been as bad for her.

Gross: I think it would have been worse. At the heart of it all is the impossible-to-discuss subject of sexuality and fantasy. That's the most uncomfortable area in all our social discourse.

Burns: And then there are deeper core feelings, the differences between men and women that will never truly get resolved.

Gross: I agree.

Burns: Finally.

