

Confused? Don't worry, it's all part of 'Vagrant's' character

BY JEFF FAVRE

One reason dreams can disorient, as well as fascinate, is that facts get distorted and blend with fiction. That's why the stories that play in our sleeping minds are frequently hard to retell to another person once we are awake.

With his latest play, "Vagrant," appearing at the Electric Lodge in Venice, Guy Zimmerman has fashioned a dreamlike state where reality fluctuates and time ceases to be linear.

Hardly your mainstream evening of theater, it is typical

REVIEW

"Vagrant" plays at 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays until March 4 at Electric Lodge, 1416 Electric Ave., Venice. Tickets are \$15. For more information, call 310-823-0710, or go to www.paduaplaywrights.net.

of what to expect with Zimmerman, or any Padua Playwrights production. The company, for which Zimmerman has served as artistic director since 2001, has the well-earned honor of being the area's leader in com-

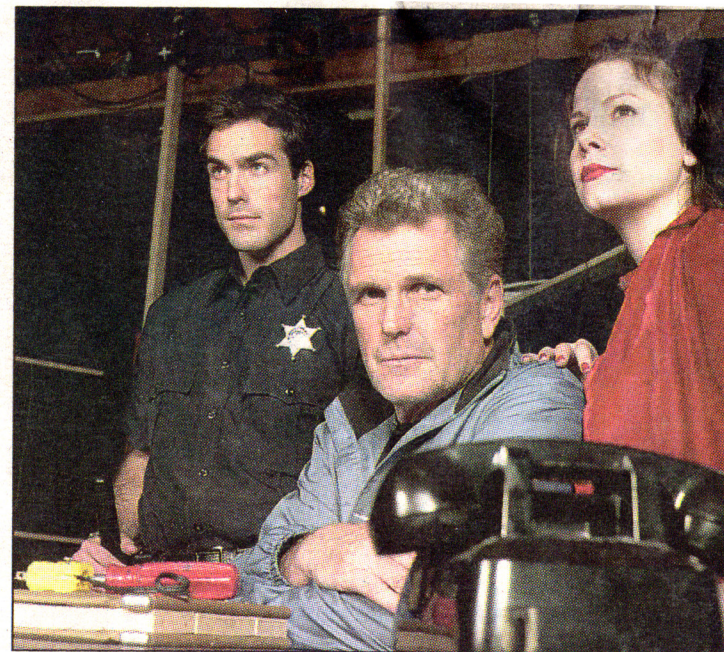
plex works that dive fearlessly into the text, striving more for an expression of ideas and emotion than presenting a cohesive and easily digestible story.

That description might make some theatergoers wary, but they shouldn't be. "Vagrant" is funny, and it's a successful homage to the film noir genre. It's well-acted and tightly directed by Zimmerman. And its running time of 80 minutes with an intermission keeps the script's intentional repetition from becoming tiresome.

"Vagrant" is set in an appliance sales and repair shop in Los Angeles, run by an angry man named Meyer (Christopher Allport, who has a recurring role in ABC's "Commander in Chief"). Larkin (Patrick Burleigh), a policeman, is questioning Meyer about a vagrant whom other officers removed from outside the shop because Meyer complained that he was causing problems.

Larkin also speaks to Meyer's wife, Patty (Niamh McCormally), who appears to live in a back storage room, and who has been distraught since the disappearance of the couple's daughter years earlier.

The dialogue is sparse and darkly humorous. For example, Meyer describes Patty by saying, "Once she worms your way into



Patrick Burleigh, left, Christopher Allport and Niamh McCormally star in the dreamlike play set in an appliance sales and repair shop.

your heart, you need an ax to hack her out."

The structure of "Vagrant" resembles most David Lynch movies, where halfway through, everything is turned on its side. It becomes unclear who Meyer is, and what relationship he has to Patty and Larkin. You become unsure of who — if anyone — is real.

The script wrestles with the idea of memory, the way humans relive moments — often tragic mistakes — until those moments take on lives of their own. As director, Zimmerman has kept the action spare and the pace swift, befitting the noir genre.

The performances border on melodrama. As Meyer, Allport appears on the verge of exploding. He shouts or growls most of his lines and his expressions fluctuate between scowls and bewilderment.

Burleigh uses piercing stares and a confident tone to make Larkin seem, at first, like the stereotypical cop. Gradually, his assuredness turns to confusion, which adds to the mystery surrounding his character.

McCormally is eerie as the somber Patty. Her blank eyes and lyrical voice register as a woman who has lost her mind.

A major contributor to the success of "Vagrant" is sound designer Don Preston. Foreboding music swells at the most tense moments, heightening the sense of danger.

Those who see "Vagrant" are likely to have a unique take regarding the play's statement on humanity. And fodder for engaging post-performance debates is a sign that Zimmerman has done his job well.

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