

Los Angeles Times

Friday, February 24, 2006

More questions than answers

A dual pulse of intrigue and satire wafts through "Vagrant." Author-director Guy Zimmerman exploits our unwitting senses in his oddball psychological mystery, presented by Padua Playwrights at the Electric Lodge.

Set in a rundown South L.A. appliance repair shop (keenly suggested by Jeffrey Atherton's striking scenic design), "Vagrant" concerns Meyer (the fierce Christopher Allport), the proprietor. He may or may not be an ex-con, just as uniformed Larkin (Patrick Burleigh, smoothly underplaying) may or may not be an LAPD officer. They banter in hyper-poetic, meticulously calibrated non-sequiturs that avoid pretentiousness through their sharp arrangement. Behind the upstage door lurks Patty (Niamh McCormally), Meyer's much-younger wife. Or is she the child both she and Meyer refer to? Is she a seamstress or a prostitute when she's offstage? And just how does Larkin know so much about both of them?

"Vagrant" just keeps spitting out narrative questions like olive pits. Even the central device of a title homeless person proves less a clue than unifying simile.

Zimmerman probably doesn't need the intermission, despite its schematic precision, and his third-person syntax won't be to all tastes. Nonetheless, Zimmerman draws this oblique scenario with assurance, and gives it a cagey symbolist staging. Kathi O'Donohue does a painterly lighting job, Don Preston's sound design provides witty comment, and the shrewd cast catches the faux-noir tone. Darkly humorous and oddly arresting, "Vagrant" is fragrant with atmosphere. For all its deliberate opacity, the effects are lingering.

— D.C.N.

"Vagrant," Electric Lodge Performance Space, 1416 Electric Ave., Venice. 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays. Ends March 4. \$15. (310) 823-0710 or reservations@paduaplaywrights.net. Running time: 1 hour, 25 minutes.