

CASTING CALL *Dragon Productions' 'Private Eyes' features Kelly Rinehart (left), Sara Luna and Martin Gagen.*

Staged Deceit

TRUTH is often an elusive commodity when it comes to the theater. No one onstage speaks it in the literal sense, although the words that come out of their mouths can have truth to them. Some actors utter their lines in a truthful way, causing us to believe they are in agony or ecstasy, the owners of broken hearts or ones bursting with joy. Others stand and deliver with robotic precision, hitting all their marks, never flubbing a line, and we don't believe a word they say. Steven Dietz's *Private Eyes*, the new offering from Dragon Productions, pushes this underlying conundrum by adding multiple layers of deliberate deceit. The action begins with an innocent enough lie by Lisa (Kelly Rinehart) as she's auditioning for Matthew (Fred Pitts), who is casting a play.

In her scene, she plays a waitress, which means she must speak to an empty chair. Have you ever been a waitress? Matthew asks her. No, she replies.

They do the scene again, only this time with Matthew filling the empty seat. The effect is immediate, as Lisa's part comes alive with the help of a colleague. Matthew, however, is a tough sell, remarking that doing the scene with her had merely convinced him that her assertion that she had never been a waitress must be true. Or is it? The audience is not supposed to know who's telling the truth about this or that minor circumstance, or even if the scene we are watching is a part of the play that Lisa is auditioning for or something most of us might call reality. It's a perfectly fine premise, but the novelty of this cat-and-mouse game that Dietz appears to delight in wears a bit thin. Why, we wonder, is all of this so important?

Well, in truth, if that's the right word, it's not, but some fine acting makes *Private Eyes* well worth watching. Rinehart's Lisa is game and expressive, vulnerable about being put in the position of having to perform for a man who holds her fate in his hands, conflicted about her revealed infidelity to her husband. This is potentially potent stuff, but I wish Dietz had given his character a reason for cheating on her husband. I could not discern her core motivation, beyond the sexual excitement that accompanies sneaking around, and we get no glimpse of defects in her husband's behavior that might have pushed her down the path of duplicity. Martin Gagen's Adrian, Lisa's director in the play within this play, is another standout. He owns his character and effortlessly bends it to his will. The yin to his yang, or perhaps it's the other way around, is Fred Pitts, whose Matthew is at his best when he's responding to the mischief that's been sown at his expense with passive-aggressive mischief of his own. Rounding out the cast is Sara Luna as various incarnations of Corey, a beautiful and dangerous muse, and Vic Prosak, whose turn as the sometimes-surreal Frank, whose ostensible job is to help his fellow characters, and us, make sense of the blizzard of deceptions on view.—Ben Marks

Private Eyes

Through Feb. 13
Dragon Theatre, Palo Alto
\$16–\$25