

It's all in a farcical day's work in SCR's 'Taking Steps'

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There's nothing like a British farce to make you feel stubbornly, even condescendingly American.

Oh, the English, with their love of bawdy adolescent silliness -- clearly the Freudian flip-side of a stiff-upper-lip severity. As for the French door-slamming variety, it could have even the most cosmopolitan among us reminiscing about freedom fries. Of course, screwball can be delightful, but the zaniness is at its fizzy best when served up by larger-than-life personalities, not mathematically organized by the theatrical equivalent of an air traffic controller.

Which brings us to **South Coast Repertory's** new production of "**Taking Steps**," Alan Ayckbourn's breathless 1979 comedy.

Yes, there's much to recommend in this stylish if sluggish revival by director Art Manke. The game cast features Bill Brochtrup (formerly of "NYPD Blue") in a Charles Nelson Reilly get-up and a knockabout knockout Kirsten Potter. The disco soundtrack adds some boogie oogie oogie to Angela Balogh Calin's plaid and polyester wardrobe designs. And Ralph Funicello's sets lucidly conjure the run-down Victorian mansion in which the high jinks tackily run riot.

If only there were a reason to care about the romantic mayhem.

Farce at its best invites us to observe characters as they play hide and seek with their feelings -- it's a masquerade ball in which everyone's disguising an inner self. But the genre requires a sympathetic point of entry, and the production doesn't offer a large enough keyhole.

At the outset, Elizabeth (Potter), a conceited dancer, is preparing to leave her husband, Roland (Rob Nagle), a successful businessman who's deciding whether to buy the rambling house (a supposedly haunted ex-brothel) they've been leasing. Is her desire to split coming from a fear of commitment or just plain common sense?

"He's . . . well, he's a slob, really, but you could have done a lot worse," Elizabeth's brother, Mark (Brochtrup), tells her. Furthermore, he reminds her that marriage is "intended as a 30-year marathon.

Not a three-month sprint."

Mark has invited his runaway fiancée, Kitty (Emily Eiden), a lost soul who doesn't want to be found by him, to his sister's place. He's hoping to reconcile with her, but the immediate plan is for him to keep Roland company while Elizabeth abandons him. Adding chaos to confusion are two other visitors, Tristram (Kasey Mahaffy), an easily flustered junior solicitor sent to advise Roland on the real estate purchase, and Leslie Bainbridge (Louis Lotorto), the seller who struts around in leather chaps and a Rod Stewart hairdo, eager to seal the deal.

"Taking Steps," the ninth Ayckbourn play to be produced at South Coast Rep, is notable for its ingenious solution to a seemingly insuperable logistical challenge. How can the antics inside a three-story house be portrayed in a theater-in-the-round configuration that won't support the building of multiple levels? Writing and directing at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough, England, Ayckbourn came up with the idea of having the actors mime the climbing of flight after flight of stairs.

Somehow, the effect, which should humorously mirror the exhaustion of mismatched love, seems more grinding than giddy on the Segerstrom Stage. The venue doesn't offer the same all-around views, but the bigger problem is that the actors, who are otherwise unfailingly energetic, seem to be half-heartedly going along with the play's cardio-testing conceit.

The fun here stems largely from the production's outré characterizations. Dressed as though a disco dance floor could light up under their feet at any moment, the ensemble members resemble a coed version of the **Village People**. Yet the striking difference with this crew is that its ambivalence toward monogamy is less about the merry-go-round of carnal possibilities than the heartbreaking difficulty of sustaining a mutual dream of happiness.

It's tried and true Ayckbourn territory -- in other words, Neil Simon with a tragic twist. The pathos is haunting, but the figures are only half-real. Their other half, naturally, is pure theatrical contrivance. Manke isn't able to synthesize the authentic and the audacious, but he certainly has a field day coloring in the characters' exaggerated features.

With his ludicrously long sideburns and embarrassingly tight-fitting trousers, Nagle's Roland seems like an ex-porn star gone to seed. Potter's Elizabeth is the perfect self-absorbed match for him, even though the more he worships her, the more she wants to flee.

If Eiden's Kitty never comes into focus, it's not just because she's locked up in the attic for much of the play. Her relationship with Brochtrup's fey Mark isn't just unhappy; it's downright implausible.

But for those with a tolerance for outlandish comic calisthenics, "Taking Steps" doesn't let up. In addition to musical beds, there's a steady stream of slapstick, which grows especially slappy when

Lotorto's Bainbridge arrives on the scene and goes into rescue mode after discovering a suicide note and a bunch of sleeping pill-zonked zombies.

It's all in a farcical day's work, but what an elaborate circus for such minor mirth.

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