

One dimension flatland

In 1979, Alan Ayckbourn premiered play no. 24 of an intended play-a-year output that, according to his Web site, hit opus 71 this year. *Taking Steps*, a theatrical Exercycle built for six, is now outfitted in vintage '70s trappings for a season-ending South Coast Repertory staging by Art Manke (through June 15). You'll have to look hard for redeeming social relevance in Ayckbourn's thinly veiled message about taking the difficult step to change one's lot in life. But that's looking at the diaphanous wrap instead of the woman wearing it – especially misguided when she's been shaped for sheer hanky-panky. Instead, Ayckbourn and director Art Manke have built their comedy upon the imaginary steps that turn Ralph Funicello's single-story set into three floors. And, while the actors gamely bounce upon them to rise above the stage floor, rising above the thin material proves more elusive.

Manke and cast go after and get the laughs, with as much physical comedy as has been exacted on these boards since they bore their five previous Ayckbourn productions, which included a fall into a swimming pool by late great Steve DeNaut in *Man of the Moment*, food fighting in *How the Other Half Loves* with Paxton Whitehead, Robert Curtis Brown and Ron Boussom, and all manner of chaos in *A Chorus of Disapproval* starring Joe Spano and David Schramm.

This play's large, leaky home with the imaginary stairwells belongs to a Mr. Bainbridge (Louis Lotorto), who desperately wants to unload it onto its current tenants, recently married Roland (Rob Nagle) and Elizabeth (Kirsten Potter). Contracts are to be signed, coincidentally, on the night Elizabeth has chosen to leave Roland (leaving an illegible note to say she is gone) and her brother Mark (Bill Brocktrup) will attempt to reconcile with ex-fiancee Kitty (Emily Eiden), back for the first time since aborting their wedding.

The play is a whirligig of people misunderstanding messages, mistaking identities, or just missing each other as the move about the single floor representing the three-story home. Manke and crew have honed the timing to clockwork. The center post of this merry-go-round story should be, like Charlie in *The Foreigner* or Alice in *Wonderland*, the innocent who enters the crazy world and inadvertently goes through the biggest arc of anyone. Here, it's Kasey Mahaffy's Mr. Watson from the office of Roland's solicitors.

To keep him from appearing too normal, however, Ayckbourn gives Watson a nervous speech condition, which Mahaffy delivers haltingly, reminiscent of Monty Python's Michael Palin. Unfortunately, the affect prevents the character from being substantial enough to provide the needed fulcrum.

The other actors do better with the less developing characters. Nagle, the big delight of the show, helps the over-drinking Roland to his feet with great timing and accents, before being pressed into service in a painfully funny encounter with a rollaway bed. Lotorto, too, is spot-on without ever overstepping. Eiden, with the smallest role, keeps her energy up despite long stretches immobilized in an attic closet. And Brocktrup, the image of a dashing young Charles Nelson Reilly, has great fun as the smitten brother. Potter, making the most of a character who, despite taking great pains to leave her husband, returns to bed him, then fails to recognize a vital member of the household staff, shows her prowess by slyly showing Elizabeth's lack of it.

Angela Balogh Calin has fun recalling the era in costumes that scream quietly. Steven Cahill pumps up a nostalgic soundtrack that Manke the Choreographer can't resist turning into a fun, "Fever-ish disco curtain call. It's a well called show, too. Watch the perfect cuing of the creaking floor that "sounds" as the actors bounce on it.

Much effort went into a program timeline that helps set the play in its historical context. This is useful, since one isn't going to find context within the play. Audiences looking for solid silliness – and there was a matinee full of them when we attended – will be rewarded. Others will imagine the set's invisible floors easier than they will conceive of a story.