

# The Theater Times

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## Red Herring

by Michael Hollinger, directed by Andrew Barnicle **Southern California Premiere**

Laguna Playhouse • February 12-March 16, 2008 (Opened, rev'd 2/16)

Ill-fitting shoes are a recurring problem in Michael Hollinger's 'Red Herring,' a crazy, *noir*-inspired comedy currently receiving its Southern California premiere at the Laguna Playhouse through March 16. However, Andrew Barnicle's well-cast and well-paced staging suggests a playwright who could neatly fill the shoes of Larry Shue, the late actor-writer whose short playlist remains a regional mainstay. Wherein lies the real mystery of 'Red Herring': Why haven't scripts by this prolific Philadelphia playwright begun to cure commercial theater of its addiction to Doc Simon and the like? The only clue that surfaces, judging from this play, is the writer's inability to rein-in runaway plotlines, that become as hard to untangle as 200 feet of fishing line.

We understand that the 'red herring' is a device as well as a title. But Hollinger has loosed a veritable grunion run of them. You'll need a bag of runes and the GPS from your dashboard to follow this 'Herring' through its over-woven story. Still, Hollinger's divine gift for imaginative comedy writing makes it a plunge worth taking. There's enough cathartic laughter in 'Herring' to cheer even the broken-hearted.

But, start with a murder victim who goes by as many aliases as a cat has lives, add characters pretending to be married, double-cast just about everybody, mix waterfronts in Wisconsin, Boston and Bali, and you are just getting started on the confusion. The very loose chalk outline of 'Herring' begins with the dropping of a stiff from Bruce Goodrich's imposing dock set (to the ominous sounds of another fine David Edwards' design) before Boston cop Maggie (Kirsten Potter) and her G-Man fiancée Frank (Brendan Ford) chat about their cases (which may or may not connect). The other shoe drops when Maggie is pulled from the case and a dark secret about her past derails the pairs trip to the altar.

Meanwhile back in Wisconsin, Lynn McCarthy (Traci L. Crouch), dear-but-dizzy daughter of red baiting Senator Joe, is haplessly helping James (Brett Ryback), her All-American Soviet spy of a fiancée, to pass microfilm. Another pair of opportunists, Mrs. Kravitz (DeeDee Rescher) and Andrei Borchevsky (Tom Shelton), are also embroiled to their biceps in the Velveta-thick plot.

So many red herrings begin to add up as missed opportunities. But the jokes are crisp and the actors' delivery terrific. From the opening bedroom banter between Maggie and Frank (paraphrasing: He: "Hey. It's bad form to call another man's name during love-making." She, "I thought 'Oh Jesus!' was the exception.") right through to a *noir*-style 'How You Likes It' finale (complete with mismatched handcuffs), Barnicle's band of players hits every note. Potter (our 2006 Favorite Female Lead for Rosalind in Noise Within's 'As You Like It') continues to please as Maggie, putting just the right patina on her soft-shelled "flat foot in heels." Crouch is a comic revelation after surviving the train wreck of 'The Verdi Girls' on this stage last year.

In one of the two scenes that most recall the spirit of Shue, Hollinger has written a five-second delay into an international phone conversation between Lynn and James. Crouch and Ryback clearly gave this section extra attention, and still it crackles with spontaneity. Rescher and Shelton, who carry the bulk of the multiple-casting demands, really shine. Shelton, who must do a crazy full-body interpretive dance sign language, keeps his rubber face straight as he gyrates. Ford, too, plays the tough romantic lead,



**DeeDee Rescher**  
**Traci L. Crouch**

PHOTO ED KRIEGER

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then shifts to silliness for a second role.

What's keeping Hollinger from owning Rialto real estate may be this way he undermines the pleasure of his perfectly sculpted set-ups and one-liners (there are several mis-appropriated responses ala 'Airplane's' "Don't call me surely" gags) with storytelling clutter. He demands both sides of the brain – the fun loving and the analytical – to run at fever pitch: losing ourselves in laughter while being vigilant for clues. It's like asking Einstein and Larry the Cable Guy to share a rowboat. We know which one is going to steer. And, while Larry heads for Mr. Toad's Wild Ride, whatever Al is saying back in the stern goes in one oar and out the rudder.

The theater could use more comedies that will overflow coffers with cash, and overpower coughers with laughs. Hollinger owes it to himself (and his heirs) to find the 'Nerd' or 'Foreigner' in his wheelhouse. He obviously is devoted to theater. Why he's writing children's touring shows and not stoking the sitcom machinery is a mystery we hope he never detects. In the meantime, we look forward to his next script. Maybe he can stay in period with a '60s TV show backstage comedy like 'The Mel Coolie Mysteries': minimal plot, plenty of laughs, and more heart. Such a play might earn him favored status at theaters across America, who in turn may finally be willing to drop old titles from their schedules like so many stiffs "from the 23rd Floor."

– **Cristofer Gross**

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**WITH** Traci L. Crouch, Brendan Ford, Kirsten Potter, DeeDee Rescher, Brett Ryback, Tom Shelton **PRODUCTION** Bruce Goodrich, set; Julie Keen, costumes; Paulie Jenkins, lights; David Edwards, sound; Vernon Willet/Jennifer Ellen Butler, stage management