

THE WICKED STAGE

IN PUBLIC by George Hunka

Reviewed by Robert Kendt

(Originally written for the *New York Times*)

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Lesson for accused philanderers: Don't look the man you may be cuckolding in the eye and lecture him on the nature of honesty and guilt. 'The history of the world is a history of the attractive, imaginative lie triumphing over the truth,' says Drew (Daryl Lathon), a sleek art history professor, over drinks with Arthur (Abe Goldfarb), an anxious bartender who suspects Drew of taking an unacademic interest in his wife, Lila. Drew adds, reasonably but not helpfully: 'If you can ever know what that is.'

Poor, precious Drew can't help himself: Throughout George Hunka's insinuating, meditative new play *In Public*, this impeccably dressed tenure-tracker with a specialty in Weimar-era German art oozes smiling, sardonic superiority, as if the tawdry details of daily discourse, not to mention the finer points of who might be doing what with whom, were a trifling annoyance. Drew's wife Linda (Jennifer Gordon Thomas), a careworn teacher, is fully equipped to keep up with his rarefied game, but why should she have to work so hard? As for Lila (Ronica V. Reddick), she shares Drew's Weimar fixation, but that's not the fire that lights up their coy confab about aesthetics and the tango.

Director Isaac Butler's production gathers strength in freighted, misdirected silences and supple, rippling subtexts. The way Mr. Lathon and Ms. Thomas play an acrid face-off, ostensibly over an art treatise he's written, is a masterful demonstration in infusing a heady argument with a lethal dramatic edge.

Not every scene crackles with this tension, and the distracting comic asides of Brian Silliman, playing a series of waiters and bystanders, belong in another play. But a final, full-cast scene of tentative conciliation, with the couples chastened back into their married selves, has a bite of resignation worthy of Pinter. Who needs privacy when our public masks give us away?



October 26 – November 1, 2006

IN PUBLIC

By George Hunka

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George Hunka's incisive, sharply observed *In Public* picks up on a central but overlooked fact of New York life: Much of our private existence is played out in the open. The four main characters—two married couples grappling with a possible infidelity in their ranks—live half their waking hours in cafés, restaurants and Duane Reades. Hunka (a *TONY* contributor) and director Isaac Butler deftly communicate this reality in ways both subtle (an ever-present soundtrack of background music) and not-so-subtle (a circling chorus of waiters, bartenders and strangers, all played with a touch too much hamminess by the appealing, aptly named Brian Silliman).

Hunka's premise, while elemental, leads to a built-in situational theatricality. Because the characters are exposed to the world's gaze at times of personal crisis, their behavior remains formal and their speech somewhat stilted. Given that the subject is marriage, and that three of the four spouses are academics, it's a very Albee-ish atmosphere, albeit one with a Neil LaBute-like twist at the end. But Hunka is less cruel and more empathetic than those two writers.

The actors give exceptionally thoughtful, considered performances, with Jennifer Gordon Thomas, the potentially wronged wife a strikingly grounded, lived-in presence. This production is the inaugural offering by theatre minima, whose mission is to strip the stage down to its 'essential elements—the living body and the spoken word.' After *In Public*, all one can say is: mission accomplished.