

Murder, lust and dentistry: A ful-filling 'Women in Jeopardy' at The Public Theatre

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Kudos to playwright Wendy Macleod's 2015 critically acclaimed "Women in Jeopardy!" It is a disturbing plot wrapped in a delightfully funny play — presented last weekend and again this coming weekend by The Public Theatre in Lewiston.

Set in Salt Lake City, the story, if stripped bare, feels akin to an episode of "Criminal Minds" or perhaps "NCIS: Utah."

An attractive dental hygienist has mysteriously disappeared. There is evidence of foul play. The dentist with whom she is employed displays cringe-worthy social behavior and characteristics of a sexual predator, including maintaining a creepy basement museum of antique dental instruments that are reminiscent of a "torture chamber."

The dentist has seduced a divorcee who is oblivious to all his disturbing behavior. To the contrary, she is excited by his fixation; in fact she has given him her blessing to accompany her very attractive 19-year-old daughter on a camping weekend, alone, in a remote Utah park.

When the long-time girlfriends of the divorcee fail to convince her of the warning signs, they seek assistance from law enforcement — the sergeant assigned to the missing hygienist case. Their senses are jolted to find that the sergeant looks exactly like the dentist of whom they are suspicious. And his behavior is somewhat bizarre and elusive in providing any facts regarding the case. More unnervingly, one of the women, repulsed by the dentist, shows an enigmatic interest in the sergeant.

The friends' mistrust of the dentist imperil their relationship with their long-time comrade as they attempt to derail the romance and confirm their suspicions. Eventually, the missing person is found dismembered, the victim of a grisly murder. The likely murder weapon? An antique dental tool!

Sounds like a hilarious play so far, huh?

What shines the bright flashlight of hilarity into this dark drama is fast-paced, rapid-fire dialogue hearkening back to films like "His Gal Friday." Packed with one-liners and banter that keep the plot moving briskly, many misunderstandings, incorrect assumptions and misplaced romantic expectations swirl along a path to discovering "whodunit?"

The principal characters are Mary (played by Amanda Ryan Paige), Jo (played by Janet Mitchko) and Liz (played by Heather Dilly). They are 40-something friends for decades, all divorced, and all three now finding companionship, support and purpose in each other's company post-divorce.

Paige's Mary is like a dog with a bone, relentless in pursuit of proof that the dentist is a serial killer/sexual predator. She is likewise committed to securing the safety of her love-struck friend Liz and Liz's daughter Amanda.

Jo, in Mitchko's hands, is a bit more laid back than Mary, more sardonic, jaded and somewhat cynical. She too is deeply concerned for her friend Liz's sanity and safety, but in a more methodical way. And she delivers stinging sarcastic jabs with authority, for instance, describing Liz as "someone who would rather date a serial killer than be alone." When it is suggested that the killer might be female, she snaps back, "Women don't kill strangers, they kill husbands!"

Dilly's Liz is an emotional hot mess. She is so enervated by the dentist's sexual attention she cannot fully grasp his inappropriateness, much less consider the many things that suggest he may have an even darker side.

The women are joined in this three-ringed circus of friendship mayhem by:



Amanda Ryan Paige, Tom Harney and Nicole Fava in *Women in Jeopardy*

The dentist, Jackson Scull, and the sergeant, Kirk Sponsullar, are both played by Torsten Hillhouse, who is wonderfully dynamic and gives the dual roles distinctive contrast. Scull and Sponsullar are doppelgangers; they look exactly alike. Scull is a hyper-sexual bawdy personality. He is romantically aligned with Liz and is the prime suspect in the hygienist's disappearance. Sponsullar is a Barney Fife clone, trying to be the consummate law officer using evasive "cop speak" and elliptical statements without ever saying much. Hillhouse plays them cleverly and convincingly as two sides of the same coin.

Liz's 19-year-old daughter, Amanda, is played by Nicole Fava. Like her mother, she finds Scull appealing ("he's like 14 on the inside") and is fascinated rather than disturbed by his basement collection of antique dental equipment. Fava takes Amanda through numerous comic situations with believability, making it clear that sex and her appearance are her priorities.

Amanda's former boyfriend, Trenner, is played with uncanny authenticity by Tom Harney. Trenner is Utah's snowboarding version of a California surfer dude — none too bright and convinced he is every woman's lusty desire. He garners lots of laughs with "Captain Obvious" remarks and his penchant to misconstrue Mary's pleas to help save Amanda as potential sexual advances.

The spirited action — fueled by protective friends, Liz's blind lust and the overarching question of who-did-what — all leads to Carmel Canyon and the remote campsite where Amanda and Scull are headed.

Amid scenes of Liz's friends trying to get her away from the potentially murderous dentist, Scull making tea for everyone, tent-bound noisy love making and more, the principals are all finally assembled, in typical murder mystery fashion.

Suffice it to say that it's not long before the murder is solved, the dark plot having been pulled, battered and wrung to its conclusion.

The play's seven distinct scenes, which are set sparsely with token props, quickly move the audience from Mary's kitchen to the police station, a ski shop and finally the remote campsite, where, amid a mysterious glow in the rocky glade, the truth is revealed.

The play's snappy, fast-paced exchanges of witty, wise-cracking repartee supply plenty of comedy. The excellent cast, under the direction of Executive Director Christopher Schario, delivers all the fun and countless laughs that the seemingly somber storyline contradicts. If you enjoy adult situation comedy, this gal pal play is for you — with a murder thrown in, no extra charge.