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THEATER

"Old Times" ***

Truth relative in war of words and memories

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Paragon Theatre's "Old Times." Featuring Carolyn Valentine, Kevin Hart and Emily Paton Davies. Photos by E. Tyler Photography.

There are certain truths in the world, things that we have agreed to refer to as facts. For instance, say, that Earth is very old. Or that trouble follows tequila.

That said, another truth is that my facts may not always line up perfectly with yours. Some people believe that dinosaur fossils were planted by a trickster deity, or that ordering a fourth margarita is a good idea.

So how could we possibly agree on what took place between friends and lovers in the distant past?

Memory and the tricks it plays are but one aspect of Harold Pinter's masterpiece "Old Times," but it underlies everything. A married couple is joined at their converted farmhouse by the wife's old friend from her younger, wilder days, and the three of them



With only the sting of Harold Pinter's words, Deeley (Kevin Hart) and interloper Anna (Emily Paton Davies) verbally disembowel one another in "Old Times." (E. Tyler Photography.)

proceed to orally spar, spinning ever-more implausible yarns over what occurred 20 years ago, and to whom. Based on that wildly oversimplified description, the play sounds like a snooze- fest of monumental proportions.

But no: This is Pinter.

His dialogue is often described as "menacing." But when it comes to "Old Times," Pinter's use of language borders on violence. There are no fisticuffs or gunplay in the show, but these people — especially the husband, Deeley (Kevin Hart), and the interloper, Anna (Emily Paton Davies) — are attempting to verbally disembowel one another.

The battlefield is David Lafont's clean, beautiful set, resembling nothing so much as an austere

psychoanalyst's office, circa 1973, where they slash and burn in oral warfare, the outcome of which can only be victory or death.

Kate (Carolyn Valentine), Deeley's wife, or his "casserole," as Anna refers to her, is the prize. She spends much of the first act in a daze or reverie, as the others battle over and around her.

But Kate is fighting too, in her own way. It is no accident that Pinter references a film called "Odd Man Out." The shifts in alliances among the three starkly yet subtly illustrate the ever-slippery power dynamics at play. Now Deeley is bragging about his job and his life with (read: control over) Kate; now Anna and Kate are giggling like schoolgirls while Deeley looks on, fuming.

The unspoken sexual component that may or may not underlie the various relationships among the trio is never far off. That Deeley feels threatened by the ladies' nostalgic memories of Anna stealing Kate's underwear and whispering stories of her exploits in the dark of their shared room is a given. That Anna doesn't bother to disguise her distaste during his crude reminiscences of the first time he and Kate slept together is no surprise either.

The cast and director Suzanne Favette have done a wonderful job of capturing the surface tension of the piece, the delightfully horrid discomfort of unwanted social niceties we have all endured. Although Favette has inexplicably made a change at the end of the piece which frankly alters the author's intent rather drastically, the overall effect of the show is haunting and genuine.

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