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**THE HAUNTING**

Yuppies and ghosts mix it up in *Skinwalkers*

**THEATER**  
*Skinwalkers*

7 Stages, 1105 Euclid Ave. Through Feb. 20, Thurs-Sat, 8 p.m.; Sun, 3 p.m. \$20-\$25, 404-523-7847, www.7stages.org

BY CURT HOLMAN

7 Stages' world premiere of Murray Mednick's *Skinwalkers* examines some of the spooky flourishes of the ghost story genre for its critique of self-involved yuppies in the American Southwest. When its various elements come together, the show has the kind of mystical vibe you might get by viewing a Georgia O'Keefe cattle skull suspended over a desert landscape. More often, though, the play tries your patience and feels like being stuck in David Lynch's bad peyote trip.

While visiting family in New Mexico, Myra (Main Knispel) broods over a recent incident on the highway. While driving drunk one night, she and her husband, Tom (Daniel Petrow), may or may not have hit something: Myra recalls a strange figure, possibly masked, and a human voice, while Tom claims he saw nothing and heard only the whine of the engine. Meanwhile, a nearby highway project has disturbed an ancient Native American burial site full of sacred masks and sinister bones.

An eeriness hangs over *Skinwalkers*, but it is misdirected, as the play focuses most sharply on Tom and Myra's emotional emptiness. Myra confesses her feelings of relief over her recent miscarriage, while Tom obsesses over his old friend Richard, who died in a grisly car wreck long ago. He hears a booming voice that intones pretentious aphorisms like, "The people have become fat and criminal-minded," which raises the question: Is Richard a "skinwalker," a sinister spirit trying to return to the land of the living, or is Tom cracking up?

Mednick contrasts the young couple's petty concerns with the timelessness of the Southwest. Myra's father, Sidney (Pierre Brulaisa), a wealthy

landowner, talks about the richness of the desert and how to exploit it. And Don Jose (Normando Inmay), a bongo (or witch doctor), lectures the couple on how events in the physical world have supernatural ramifications. It's as if Don Jose serves as the couple's "spiritual" father, and Sidney their "material" one.

Knispel and Petrow are normally such energetic actors that they can play off the flatness of their deliveries here. Each of them conveys an impression of powerful feelings held in permanent check. But director Del Hamilton emphasizes staging and acting choices (inspired partially by Japanese Noh drama) that make *Skinwalkers* feel hermetically sealed off from the audience. In nearly every conversation, the actors position themselves to face the audience, not each other. We get it: The characters are disengaged from each other and wrapped up in themselves. But the artifice succeeds so well, we can't connect to the action, either.

The stilted diction proves almost comically stiff when the playwright tries to use slang, especially when Rachel Mewbron's New Age chick intones lines like, "You gotta to check it out!" Of the entire cast, Michael Hickey's homespun ranch hand comes across as the most human and comfortable, suiting the character's harmony with the landscape.

Inmay gives Don Jose the "wow, man!" rap of a manic ex-hippie, as if he's on the verge of imitating Tommy Chong. But he provides some of *Skinwalkers*' most impressive moments by playing live music, including drums and woodwinds that sound like bards or howling zephyrs. Touches like that, or the sight of a glowing, antlered figure, stick in your memory while the speeches about knowing yourself and respecting the land sound merely like environmentalist boilerplate. *Skinwalkers* loses interest in and ultimately holds itself above the satisfying conventions of ghost stories, but those are the play's only qualities that leave us feeling haunted.

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