



Opening the Curtain

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The Alchemy of Experience

This is Anthony Byrnes *Opening the Curtain on LA Theater* for KCRW.

Small theater in Los Angeles is filled with youthful exuberance. Every time you turn around there's a new company made up of the latest graduates from theater school, or a group of folks who share an acting class and a dream. Sometimes that dream's really more about Hollywood; their plays resembling a TV pilot more than a piece of theater. But you can't deny the energy, the adolescent enthusiasm and experimentation. Their plays are aspirational, both literally and metaphorically

Far less common to LA theater, is the wisdom and experience of age: the subtler more nuanced art that can only be made with a lifetime of craft and commitment: plays of contemplation.

LA playwright Murray Mednick writes plays of contemplation.

His latest production *The Fool and the Red Queen* is being billed as a single two-act play. Really it's two of Mednick's plays. Plays six and seven of his octet *The Gary Plays*. That should tell you something about the quirky commitment of Mednick as an artist. Who writes an octet of plays?

Act One focuses on Gary a middle-aged actor who hasn't worked in while, a long while. He's at a callback for a film. Gary is Mednick's everyman. He's our tragic hero; he's an actor the way Willy Loman is a salesman. Mednick isn't concerned with the tawdry details of Gary's acting career, he's writing about the existential concerns of all of us as actors in our own drama. Don't worry about plot or back-story -- this is a play you need to let wash over you. It's a meditation in the truest sense of both the word and the practice.

The recurring motifs are more like attachments that we can't let go of -- the death of a son, the idea of a career, the worth of a life. Like meditation, these ideas keep circling back as you both gain deeper insight and greater focus.

At the same time there's a slippery quality to Mednick's writing as one conversation becomes another the way seasons slip through our fingers in Los Angeles. Right in the middle of a play that seems to be about an out of work actor suddenly the characters begin 'improvising' the story of a medieval court jester - a fool - and the Red Queen that rules over him.

Act Two is a touching comedic turn on the same themes. It's the improvised story at the end of Act One come to life with different actors. We watch an old fool who's perhaps worn out his welcome as an entertainer. Berated and tested by a sexy tyrant of a queen, the fool wonders what's the value of an artist in a society at war. It's a play within a play made by people who make up plays. You can see how some folks get lost inside Mednick's plays.

Don't worry. Just be present with Mednick's words: the actors will take care of you. They all have a deep history with Mednick's plays and they bring a gift for subtle differentiation to his lyrical poetry.

The Fool and the Red Queen embodies the wonderful alchemy possible when a lifetime of craft is mixed with a still youthful experimentation with form.

The Fool and the Red Queen plays at the Lounge Theater in Hollywood through June 24.

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Run time: 2 hours and 10 minutes with intermission.

Banner image: Julia Prud-homme and Bill Celentano in *The Fool and The Red Queen* at the Lounge Theater. Photo by Mark Barnes