

Arts Review

By Heather Barfield Cole



Dress Suits to Hire

The Off Center, through April 23

Running time: 1 hr, 20 min

Two women walk into a pool of dim yellow light. They sit opposite each other wearing twin floral-print silk robes and gaze at each other in mirrored observation. One opens a crystal decanter holding a syrupy liquid Ñ it's sherry. They sip languidly. One sings a ballad while rolling nylon stockings on her legs and attaching them to a garter belt. She rises to stare beyond a neon sign, letters crooked, unblinking and dark. She chokes herself with her right hand. She falls with a thud. She dies. Then she re-emerges after a call to the police.

A world of sordid lasciviousness and unfulfilled erotic desire is the setting for *Dress Suits to Hire*, Holly Hughes' play that premiered 18 years ago in New York and is revived here by Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver. Labeled "lesbian noir," *Dress Suits* is firmly situated in feminist performance history, but it's a testament to the work that it feels entirely appropriate to our era of reckless avoidance and perversion of marginal identities. In other words, *Dress Suits to Hire* remains fringe, experimental, and a cultural threat after almost two decades, and one wonders why. This final installment of the Rude Mechanicals' Throws Like a Girl series chills

and excites in calculated disturbances.

The story is set in a clothing rental shop inhabited by two sisters who vary their costumes according to their mood and inclination. As Deeluxe, Peggy Shaw is less than feminine, according to standards having something to do with "normal." She sings a resonant melody that drips with romantic wooing and cajoling. As she unfolds a giant fan, Shaw releases a raspy "Amato Mio" and strikes a pose of decadent masculinity, raising her eyebrows, jerking her head back Ñ a constant pathos of begging and primping. Her husky voice and strong body play against the shimmering dress she changes into while recounting a muddy childhood full of spit and nasty talk. Drag within drag. Deeluxe's right hand becomes another character: Little Peter, an abusive, macho, Bogart type who does not like names for his women. Lois Weaver plays Michigan, whose femininity seems comforting and not strange to the predilections of mainstream categories. She expresses an animalistic sexuality that pushes and pulls her sister's forbidden limits. Weaver's powerful control of her body and delivery of Hughes' allegorical language stuns and mesmerizes.

Both performers interlace motivations, curiosities, and dense meaning with intense power and ease. Weaver and Shaw irritate the nerves as a theatrical device for presenting or awakening the dormant, suppressed, or ignored aspects of the process of engendering our lives. At times, the show seems unattainable, mysterious, and almost impossible to understand. Something beyond words happens; performance shows us so much about ourselves without opening mouths. What linger are images of women hungry and at play; they are dangerous women-monsters, whose threat is nothing more than the act of becoming free. The straps and zippers, ties and belts, jackets and skirts, define and determine who we are. What happens when we rent clothing to experience a brief encounter with the other side? Who tells us what to wear and how to put it on? These questions are the core to this strikingly dicey play.