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# It's a fun trip following the plot of 'Private Eyes' at Salem Theatre

Lisa and Matthew are married. They are actors in a play, about a woman having an affair with a director. Adrian is the director. Lisa is in fact having an affair with Adrian.If those details make "Private Eyes," which Salem Theatre stages now through May 7 at the troupe's new home in the Shetland ...

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The Steven Dietz comedy 'Private Eyes' keeps the audience guessing. It plays at Salem Theatre Company through May 7. COURTESY PHOTO

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The Steven Dietz comedy 'Private Eyes' keeps the audience guessing. It plays at Salem Theatre Company through May 7. COURTESY PHOTO

**By Keith Powers / Correspondent**

Posted Apr. 23, 2016 at 6:43 PM

SALEM

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SALEM

**If you go...**

**WHAT:** Salem Theatre Company's Private Eyes

**WHERE:** Salem Theatre, Shetland Park, Suite

301, 35 Congress St., Salem

**WHEN:** through May 7

**TICKETS:** \$12-\$30. Visit [www.salemtheatre.com](http://www.salemtheatre.com)

Lisa and Matthew are married. They are actors in a play, about a woman having an affair with a director. Adrian is the director. Lisa is in fact having an affair with Adrian.

If those details make "Private Eyes," which Salem Theatre stages now through May 7 at the troupe's new home in the Shetland Park complex, seem like a simple story of love betrayed, think again. Finding the truth, believing the truth, wanting the truth and even telling the truth become so complicated that it eventually seems like nobody even wants to try.

Steven Dietz' 1996 drama, which never made it to Broadway but has been popular with regional companies since its debut, could be called a play-within-a-play. More accurately, it's a story layered over the idea of a story.

The affair may seem like the center of the intrigue, but in fact the revenge fantasies that Matthew (Chris Kandra) has, the struggle the illicit couple (Lisa played by Ashley Skeffington; Adrian by Samuel Lewis) goes through to reveal the affair, the lies everyone tells each other along the way — even simplistic explanations by a therapist (Will Simmons) — all supersede the action itself.

Director Robert Cope keeps the stage and properties simple, and weaves all the playing — including the crew involved in changing the scenes — into the illusion. The two stage hands (Cailin McCormack and Ian Helmick) flirt with each other, interact with the characters, and generally extend the idea that what you see onstage is just one of the many plot possibilities.

A theme might be hard to pin down. Nobody gets fooled in this play — it's obvious an affair is happening, equally obvious that the husband is aware of it and jealous, and just as equally obvious that the lovers are struggling for a way to tell him about it.

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But delusions run rampant. Even the audience can't trust what they are witnessing, which makes the script a delicious romp through uncertainty.

Rehearsals and auditions for the "play" (it never gets named, and never performed) seamlessly morph into the "real" interaction between the lovers or the married couple. That whole scenario gets turned on its head at the end of the first act, when the psychiatrist enters, and suddenly everything seems like it might have just been one giant therapy session all along.

The second act continues this gambit: the action onstage may or may not be rehearsals of the "play," Dietz's actual play, or just another session with the shrink. The notion of the truth gets invoked repeatedly, like a mantra or a drone note: "the truth is air;" "dole out the truth like cod liver oil;" "tell the truth, but not all the time;" and in the final words of the play, "lie to everyone, but not to me."

Even the entrance of a mysterious private eye (Kate Devorak), who has already appeared as a waitress, a co-conspirator, and even a hurricane (no lie) — and finally gets unmasked as Adrian's wife — lends more credence to the belief that we're never escaping a circle of delusions. And that makes it fun to witness.

Cope has directed this production down the best possible path — simplicity. No attempt is made to clutter up this clever, sophisticated script — he lets the players act and talk.

Blocking sometimes gets in the way of itself — which is sort of a subtext to the theme. Multiple scenes have characters acting out fantasies about other characters, with those characters onstage right next to them. Interspersed tracks from Talking Heads — don't miss "Psycho Killer," inserted with the poisoned lovers lying on the stage — comment blithely on the action.

The acting is uniformly strong. Skeffington and Kandra take on the roles of the self-deceiving married couple with gusto, facilely shifting gears through multiple realities. Lewis has some physical lapses as the deluded director — there isn't really any downtime allowed in this script — but fills the unlovable role of lover admirably. Devorak plays the shape-changing wife/waitress/private eye/hurricane with smarts. Simmons looks, talks and moves like an assertive, egomaniacal shrink.

"Private Eyes" runs through May 7. Shows are Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m. For tickets and information visit [www.salemtheatre.com](http://www.salemtheatre.com).

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for the GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow @PowersKeith; email to [keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com](mailto:keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com)

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