

# Dramatic Paws

By **Bob Mondello**

**The Glory of Living**

By Rebecca Gilman

Directed by Michael Chamberlin

Produced by Didactic Theatre Company

At Warehouse Theater to June 11

**The Elephant Man**

By Bernard Pomerance

Directed by Jim Petosa

At Olney Theatre Center to June 18

**T**he phrase “hands-on” kept occurring to me in playhouses this weekend, and not just because the stage is a handmade enterprise. In an era when technology inflects nearly everything else in the dramatic arts, when circuses and horse shows are multimedia, when a film’s merit is determined largely by its director’s mastery of things technical, theater’s dependence on the hand-to-hand—on the intimate, physical connection between actor and actor, actors and audience—offers a welcome respite.

Which is not really why I was thinking of hands-on contact at this week’s openings. What brought the phrase to mind was a handshake that was care-

nessee shack to give her customers a little privacy.

Clint’s a charmer—sexy, smooth, confident—and Lisa is guessing he’ll be her ticket out of adolescent boredom when she hops into his truck, clutching a broken toy piano that afternoon. We next see them two years later, romping naked in a hotel room, still clearly infatuated. But when Lisa—now 17 and a mother herself—asks her husband for another round of lovemaking, his mood abruptly darkens. Grabbing her from behind and yanking her head back painfully by the hair, he lets her know that they’ll “do it” when he wants to, not when she demands. She retreats to the bathroom until he calms down.

Long minutes later, I saw the handprint on her shoulder—a red welt testifying starkly to the altercation that was the first hint that Lisa’s life had gone seriously off-track. But it was hardly the only hint. Even before Lisa returned to the room, Clint had pulled a younger girl from under the motel bed, her ankle shackled, her body limp and motionless. “I got

done—what she’s done—as they’ve careened almost unnoticed on a rape and murder spree through the rural South.

Gilman’s rip-snorting who-dun-what plotting makes a bigger initial impression than her unforced dialogue, which has the virtue of feeling natural in unnatural circumstances. The characters tend to watch what they say because they’re generally hiding something, but not in a way that particularly heightens speech patterns. Still, you can’t help hanging on every word as Platt and Steakley send them ricocheting around the tight confines of Colin K. Bills’ seedy claustrophobia-inducing motel rooms. Michael Chamberlin’s pulse-quickenning production uses that setting and the restricted worldviews of the characters to unnerving effect, pushing us into close contact with folks we’d increasingly like to be farther away from.

Platt’s been having quite a year limning innocence—her clueless neighbor in Signature Theater’s *The Sex Habits of American Women* prompted laughs when she erupted



Master and Command Her: Clint takes sadistic license with Lisa.

fully built up to by author, director, and actors to remarkably little effect at Olney Theatre and a handprint in a performance at the Warehouse Theater that colored a whole evening but was so unaccented that it might well have been unintentional.

Start with the latter—a rosy bruise on the shoulder of a young girl whose flirtation with a seeming sweetheart of a guy in Rebecca Gilman’s *The Glory of Living* leads her down roads no 15-year-old should ever travel. Lisa (Cassie Platt) is a fresh-faced adolescent when Clint (Clay Steakley) comes into her life, sweet-talking her into kissing him while his buddy is having sex with her mother behind a bedsheet that Mom has hung across their one-room Ten-

nessee shack to give her customers a little privacy,” he will later allow, an understatement of heroic proportions as later scenes will establish.

Lisa’s involvement in his sexcapades turns out to be more complicated than it initially appears, and by the second act, when the police are eliciting entirely causal testimony from her about Drano-filled syringes and bodies plunging off cliffs, you may find yourself clinging to memories of that hand-shaped welt on her shoulder. She was afraid, right? She had no choice, just went along with that monster she married. Look at her, still clutching her toy piano, so childlike as she nervously answers an interrogator’s questions, speaking unselfconsciously of what they’ve

in a fit of the giggles at the mere mention of sex. When Platt giggles in *Glory of Living* during one of Lisa’s Act Two interrogations, the effect is considerably more harrowing. She’s nicely paired with D.C. newcomer Steakley, who is alternately seductive and scary, chest and arms festooned with elaborate tattoos, eyes flashing dangerously.

Also affecting, in a large cast without any real weak links, are Paloma Ellis as that doomed child in shackles, Joshua Drew as a wounded survivor who craves vengeance, and Christopher Poverman as a court-appointed lawyer who is determined to understand Lisa’s mind-set long after that hand-shaped welt on her shoulder has been covered by a prison jumpsuit.