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'Gaslight' shines brightly on stage

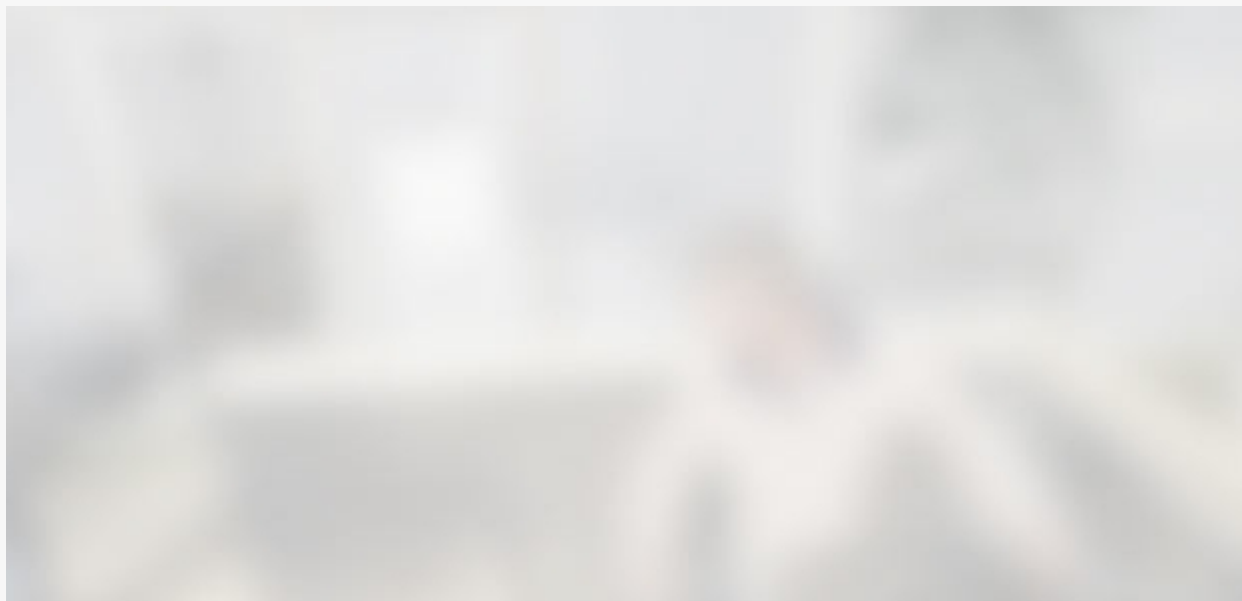
TICKET

OCT 21, 2018

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Tribune Chronicle / Andy Gray Sierra Boyle, left, and Peter Byrne are shown in a scene from the play “Gaslight,” which runs through Oct. 28 at Kent State University at Trumbull. For reservations or more information, call 330-675-8887.

CHAMPION — No need to “*gaslight*” readers. “*Gaslight*” shines brightly at Kent State University at Trumbull.

The 80-year-old play by Patrick Hamilton spawned the term “*gaslighting*,” which refers to psychologically manipulating someone so they begin to doubt their own memories / perceptions.

In this Victorian Era thriller, it’s Bella Manningham (Sierra Boyle) who is questioning her sanity. Her husband (Justin Oliver) routinely confronts her about losing bills and jewelry or moving artwork, which she has no memory of doing. Then there are the dimming gaslights in their home, which seem to indicate there is someone else inside, perhaps on the top floor that Bella is forbidden to enter.

However, her husband denies it, and Bella’s mother had a history of mental instability, so she fears it runs in her family.

Inspector Rough (Peter Byrne) offers a different scenario. The retired Scotland Yard investigator believes Mr. Manningham is someone else, someone who may have been involved in the murder of an elderly woman in that very same house 15 years ago. Rough believes he’s returned to the

scene of the crime in search of the valuable rubies the victim owned. But Rough needs Bella's help in order to prove his theory.

Is the husband the monster that Rough describes, or does the inspector have ulterior motives of his own?

Director Eric Kildow maintains the suspense and ramps up the tension, creating anxiety in the audience with something as simple as a bowler hat left on a table.

"Gaslight" is at its best in the scenes between Bella and Rough. With a spot-on Scottish brogue, Byrne turns the inspector into a brilliant charmer. He's used to being the smartest man in the room, and the fun Byrne clearly is having while playing the character is infectious.

His arrival also awakens Bella. Boyle convincingly conveys Bella's confidence returning. The beaten, cowering woman starts to trust her memory again as Rough's theory unfolds and the evidence he uncovers in the home supports it. Boyle has to take Bella from one extreme to the other and does it with skill.

Oliver is a little young for the role of Mr. Manningham and has less experience than the other two main actors, but he has moments where he creates real menace and intimidation, as well as more subtle manipulation.

Lauren Stewart and Rylie Hornung ably fill the roles of the Manningham's two servants, one who is loyal to Bella and one who seems more interested in replacing her.

The set design by Tony Kovacic and the costumes by Eileen Janis Larson are impeccable, and Leslie Brown's lighting design plays a vital storytelling role with its flickering and dimming gaslights.

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Thomas Engstrom

Andy, you are spot on in your review. This is a fine production of a wonderful old play. I urge your readers to go see it.

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