

PAT CRAIG: THEATER

## 'Loves' offers an offbeat, colorful trip back in time

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Those of us feeling so smug and hip as we bask in the warm, world-changing glow of the Summer of Love get a shocking lesson in reality and good taste from the production team of "How the Other Half Loves."

Seems not all of the era 40-some years ago was intricate macrame plant holders and tastefully wrought tie-dye.

After a while, the effervescent comedy of the new Center Repertory Company production jollies even the most die-hard boomer into laughter. But for the discerning Aquarians who stroll into the Margaret Leshner Theatre, there is an immediate slap to the sensibilities that forces us to confess that, yes, we did decorate with those migraine-bright colors, the nauseating op art and vapid day-glow posters. And, oh my God, we did wear clothes like that.



Austin Powers was never cruel enough to remind us of our worst sins. But in "How the Other Half Loves," the over-the-top sets and costumes, by Eric Sinkkonen and Laura Hazlett, create an immediate and hilarious sight gag that sets the no-prisoners style of humor with which director Michael Butler has infused this piece. The result is a joyously clever and wildly funny revival.

Alan Ayckbourn's 1970 play about life and love in this onstage twilight zone was a community theater perennial for years, but it hasn't received much attention lately. And without a cast that sparkles from top to bottom, like the one we have here, it probably should be left alone. The show has a sort of melt-in-your-mouth hipness that is fun in small doses -- probably like taking a spin down to the next freeway exit in an old VW bus with American flag curtains.

Although the '60s cool that oozes from the story could wear thin fairly quickly, what keeps Ayckbourn's play much more lively than other domestic farces from the era is its construction.

The author has created a story with numerous plots, which often unfold simultaneously on the same set. At the start, for example, Frank and Fiona Foster (Mark Anderson Phillips and Carrie Paff) are getting ready to start their morning, as are Bob and Teresa Phillips (Darren Bridgett and Sarah Nealis). Both couples navigate their the same space as if the other wasn't there. The only individual touchpoints are different front doors and different telephones -- important when we realize that Bob and Fiona are having an affair.

What we get in the story is a group of daffy characters moving around the set like crazy storm clouds. They manage not to bump into each other, but because of all the shadings of stories going on at the same time, the whole play has a fascinating richness and daft complexity to it.

Phillips' character of Frank Foster gets the story moving in its insanely meandering direction by entering the scene as a cross between a comet and a odd hybrid blend of Austin Powers, John Cleese and Ned Flanders from "The Simpsons." He is a twit with a heart of gold, who worries because there are affairs going on in his very office (where, it turns out, Bob Phillips works).

Frank is afraid the culprit is William Featherstone (Jeffrey Draper), and manages to see that William and his wife, Mary (the wildly funny Lizzie Calogero), are invited for dinner (the couple is also invited to the Phillips home for a meal that takes place on a different day in time, but in the same place onstage).

The whole piece has a wonderful high style and droll sense of humor to it, including a young female crew clad in '60s Mondrian-style dresses who give a whole new meaning to the term burly stagehand.