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LIVING

## 'No Exit,' from Hell

By Brent Hallenbeck, Free Press Staff Writer

There's no intermission during Jean-Paul Sartre's "No Exit." There are no breaks for rest in hell.

The hell introduced to us by Sartre, and the terrific ensemble that debuted the Champlain Theatre's presentation Thursday night, is a hell we don't expect. It's a hell of our own making. Hell is the things we want from other people but can never get. Hell is the things other people see in us that we don't want to see ourselves. Hell is the things we want to be, but never will be.

Hell, strangely enough, is also funny; darkly so, anyway. The taut, 90-minute Champlain Theatre production brings out the comedic irony of the French philosopher's most famous work (humming "Heaven/I'm in heaven" in hell?) but never loses sight of the human drama found in the mirrors others provide for us.

Sartre's existential hell includes three people who, until the play starts, had never met -- Garcin (played by John David Alexander), who died a cowardly death; Ines (Annemieke Wade), a manipulative man-hater who freely admits, "I'm wicked. I need other people to suffer in order to live"; and Estelle (Alexandra Sevakian), who's vain, shallow, and fatally flippant about other people's lives.

The trio is trapped in a blandly decorated room and slowly comes to realize that their *raison d'etre* is to reflect back to each other what it was that made their lives fail. Sartre's philosophy was that man and man alone controls his destiny. The destiny of these three people is to understand what they did to make this form of hell their destiny; that understanding provides the true tortures of hell.

"We are what we want to be," Garcin says in a rare moment of optimism. Ines, the harsh realist, corrects him. "You're never anything more than your life," she says.

"No Exit" is filled with lines like that, terse and powerful. Joanne Farrell has assembled and smartly directed a cast that's more than capable of delivering a blistering script, a cast that's practically an all-star team of Burlington-area actors -- Sevakian, a riot in the Champlain Theatre's excellent production of "The Cripple of Inishmaan" last March; Wade, compelling last spring in Stephen Goldberg's "The Truth Has No Heart"; and **the omnipresent Alexander, a professional actor who brings class, humor and strength to just about everything he does.**

**Alexander's character trickles down from blustery to uncertain to shattered, but his energy as an actor never wanes even as Garcin's self-esteem is sapped.** When he sharply delivers the play's most famous line, "Hell is other people," it's clear he's not being misanthropic, but is finally coming to grips with the shortcomings other people reveal for him.

Wade, intramurals and activities coordinator at Champlain College, deftly highlights the seemingly contradictory characteristics -- sultry and stand-offish -- of Ines. Sevakian, a student at Champlain, dances gracefully (literally at one point) between Estelle's almost-manic, childlike extremes of innocently giddy and deeply wounded.

If there's a weakness in the play it's expressed by Estelle, who at one point tells Garcin, "You think too much," a remark Sartre might have been directing toward himself. But he's a philosopher, for goodness sake, so let's cut him some slack.

If there's one great strength in this version of "No Exit," it's that a member of the Champlain College community, Wes Donehower, chairman of the arts and sciences division for almost 20 years, translated the play from the original French. That's a remarkable achievement to take a play from one language to another without losing its message. And in the hands of Champlain Theatre, it's an existentialist message delivered loud and clear.

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