

Anyone who saw Theatre Factory's 1997 production of the 1978 Broadway mystery *Death Trap* will be struck by an obvious parallel with the company's current thriller, an original stage adaptation of Alfred Hitchcock's 1948 film *Rope*. In both plays, company members Craig Bailey and Brian Torstenson play a gay couple conspiring to commit murder — Bailey supplies the brains and most of the brawn while Torstenson is the willing, if nervous, accomplice.

In *Death Trap*, the homosexuality is revealed in a mid-play plot twist; in *Rope*, it is simply a pre-existing fact that subtly influences events — as all relationships do — but does not *cause* them. Ditto the murder. By the time *Rope* opens, the dirty deed is done. Bailey's Brandon Shaw and Torstenson's Phillip Morgan have killed prep-school chum David Kentley and stuffed him in a trunk, which doubles as a dinner table. The party guests include the dead man's parents and would-be fiancée:

It's a can't-miss scenario for creating dramatic tension. The dead body stays in the trunk throughout the entire play while Shaw and Morgan, Nietzschean *ubermenschen* out to prove their superiority, try to keep their cool. Things immediately heat up as questions circulate about the whereabouts of

the tardy guest — guess who? The whole sordid situation comes to a boil when the keen-eyed Rupert Cadell, played by John D. Alexander, openly suspects his hosts of evil-doing.

Thickly plotted though *Rope* may be, its age presents a number of knotty challenges. It's a 50-year-old work — older, actually, since Patrick Hamilton's original play, from which the film was adapted, premiered in 1929 — that looks and sounds its half century. The costumes successfully

don, a poker-faced bully who finds the very notion of his fallibility an insult. More often than not, however, he goes over the top, delivering his lines at a volume that underscores the already exaggerated formality of the play, and makes the other characters seem like wallflowers by contrast — especially his lover, who is so easily shouted down you are left wondering about the credibility of their relationship.

Alexander's Rupert is perhaps the strongest performance

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evoke the cocktail set of post-war Manhattan. Credit goes to director Candy Peate, set designer Charles Padula and the cast, whose studied stiffness seems entirely appropriate.

Taken as a whole, though, these elements also create a static, stagy feel that makes the work at times feel inaccessible. That *Rope* lacks much obvious relevance in the present day — though hardly the fault of this production — doesn't help bridge the gap.

A period piece is never necessarily doomed to irrelevance; to make the leap in time, though, requires characters and situations an audience can relate to. And beyond its killer plot, *Rope* doesn't offer a whole lot.

Bailey is alternately intriguing and overbearing as Bran-

don, and he unravels the plot with real skill. As the rogue bachelor guest in a pin-striped suit, he offers ironic commentary and asides — on his way from the trunk to the sideboard and back again — with a welcome ease and fluidity.

Sandy Zabriskie, in the role of Mr. Henry Kentley, is convincingly perplexed behind his white beard, speaking in the broken, naturalistic meter of a tweedy elder embarrassed by his no-show son and bewildered by his son's bad friends. Stephanie Decarreau as the victim's gal Janet Walker is also strong; her spunk and sass, along with Alexander's devilish charm, helps strike a balance between mannered and malleable that from time to time lifts this play out of its wooden box. ⑦

Rope, a stage adaptation of Alfred Hitchcock's film by Theatre Factory. Mann Hall Auditorium, Trinity College, Burlington, October 15-17, 8 p.m.; October 18, 2 p.m.