

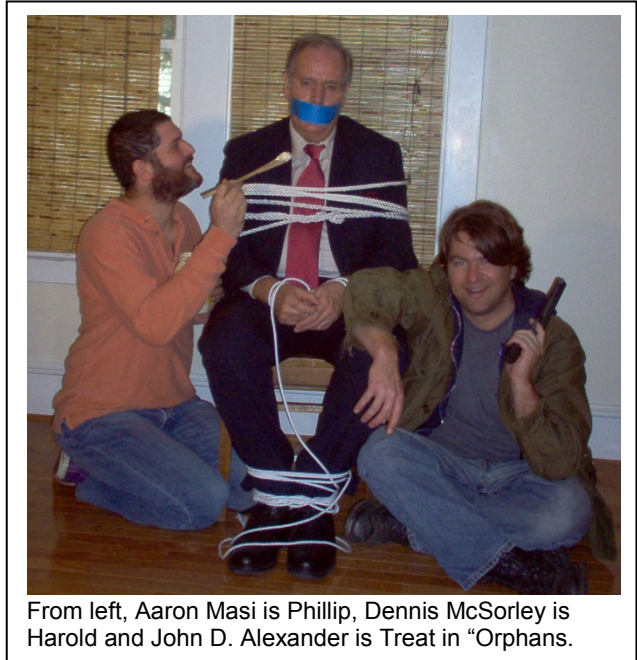
Theater Review: 'Orphans' a tough, black comedy

By **Jim Lowe**

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BURLINGTON — Lyle Kessler's "Orphans" could be seen as a gritty thriller or a blacker-than-black comedy. The Three Men on a Buffalo production, which opened Wednesday at the Off Center for the Performing Arts, conjured up plenty of both. It runs through March 26.

Three Men on a Buffalo Productions is a reunion of the forces that offered a compelling production of David Mamet's "American Buffalo" last season at the Flynndog Gallery. Director Tara Lee Downs and the acting triumvirate of John D. Alexander, Aaron Masi and Dennis McSorley found plenty of dark meat in this 1983 tragi-comedy.



From left, Aaron Masi is Phillip, Dennis McSorley is Harold and John D. Alexander is Treat in "Orphans."

The action occurs in a squalid row house in North Philadelphia where orphaned brothers Phillip and Treat live a hand-to-mouth existence. Phillip is unable to leave the home due to allergies and is mentally limited: unable to read, he learns only from television. Treat, a petty thief, supports the two by robbing people on the street at knifepoint.

One night, Treat brings home a well-dressed gentleman with the intention of holding him for ransom. But, it isn't long before Harold, a Chicago gangster and self-described orphan, turns the tables. Using Phillip's blind faith and Treat's seething anger, he tries to change their world. But can he overpower Treat's determined self-destructiveness?

This intimate production had some rough spots during Wednesday's opening night production, a stiff ending in particular, but delivered the punch — as well as the black humor — of this little gem quite effectively. Well-cast and well-directed, it was just a little scary — as well as entertaining.

McSorley gave full dimension to Harold, revealing his conflicted roughneck and paternal sides. Alexander beautifully mixed scary and pathetic as Treat, who cannot quite define himself in the real world. Masi was entirely convincing as the naïve Phillip whose only aspiration is to enjoy his life.

The minimal staging proved adequate but lacked imagination and impact. The brightly lit stage killed any sense of mystery, brooding or anticipation. Still, it proved an intense experience.

It's great to see tough, compelling theater in Burlington again.