

## Review: 'Orphans' - Gripping drama in dingy setting

BY BRENT HALLENBECK

The name of the company — Three Men on a Buffalo Productions — may be new, but the trio of actors at its core - John D. Alexander, Dennis McSorley and Aaron Masi - has worked together before to great effect, specifically a couple of years ago on the Green Candle Theatre Company's presentation of David Mamet's "American Buffalo."

The triumvirate is back in a play with a similar who's-hustling-the-hustler tone in the Lyle Kessler work "Orphans," a surprisingly stunning little psychological drama that Alexander, McSorley and Masi - who do drama about as well as any actors in town - bring to full life on the stage at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts.

"Orphans," which opened Wednesday night, begins with Phillip (played by Masi) watching "The Price is Right" with way more enthusiasm than anyone has a right to. His sweet, simple nature lends itself to domination from his older brother, Treat (Alexander), a petty street thug who acts like he's caring for his sibling when in actuality he's doing whatever he can to make sure the insecure Phillip stays dependent upon him.

Then one night Treat brings a drunken Chicago businessman named Harold (McSorley) into the brothers' Philadelphia home with the idea of robbing him — an idea that turns to kidnapping when Treat, with dollar signs practically materializing in his eyes, opens Harold's briefcase and discovers reams of valuable stocks and bonds. Once Harold sobers up, however, he pulls a reverse Stockholm syndrome on Phillip, who comes under Harold's spell once Harold shows the younger man the genuine attention his brother has never shared (the three characters have one key connection - they're parentless, giving the play its title and much of its focus).

From there, "Orphans" (despite drifting off course a wee bit in the early moments of the second act) twists and turns into a tense battle of wills as the catalyst provided by Harold's entrance in the brothers' isolated world practically changes the chemical composition of all three men. Will this battle end with each of these men taking from each other, or, more improbably, giving to each other?

Tara Lee Downs, who directed these three actors in "American Buffalo," draws great performances out of them again at the helm of "Orphans," especially from Masi. He really broke onto the Burlington theater scene with his role in "American Buffalo" and climbs even higher with the outstanding range he demonstrates in "Orphans." Phillip sways between quiet and sensitive to funny and angry and, in the play's hard-hitting ending, emotionally devastating. He turns Phillip into an instantly sympathetic character, which makes the place where the play's central figure winds up at the end that much more powerful.

Alexander and McSorley aren't the sorts to fade into the woodwork. Both tap deeply into their characters' manipulative ways, with Treat's manipulation all about himself and Harold's for more mysterious reasons. Alexander gives Treat the short fuse that makes his character so dangerous while McSorley brings out a sagacious quality in the out-of-towner with the murky life story.

The entire play takes place in the brothers' dingy apartment, which Mark Roberts, an actor who had not previously overseen a set design, assembled perfectly, from the couch that shouts dowdy to the mayonnaise jar with the sagging label on the kitchen table to the institutionally beige walls decorated only with large smudges that tell their own stories about all that's gone on in the brothers' home over the years. It's a confining space filled with emotional heat that, inevitably, leads to a fierce but thrilling explosion.