

## Twisting plot will give 'Veronica' audience shivers

By Everett Evans | October 15, 2013

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Photo By Bruce Bennett

Teresa Zimmermann stars as the imperiled heroine in Stages Repertory Theater's "Veronica's Room."



### More Information

'Veronica's Room'

When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays-Thursdays, 8 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays, through Nov. 3

Where: Stages Repertory Theatre, 3201 Allen Parkway

Tickets: \$23-\$54; 713-527-0123

As you might have guessed, Susan finds herself a prisoner, with others insisting she really is the person she'd agreed to impersonate - trapped in a limbo between reality and fantasy, reason and delusion. Who is she, really? And are the Mackeys really who they claimed to be, or other individuals with other aims? Are we in 1973, as Susan believes? Or are we in 1935, as others are soon insisting to her? If it's all an elaborate hoax to either convince Susan she is Veronica, or simply drive her mad, then what could possibly be the motive behind these Byzantine intrigues?

The premise supplies juicy fun in its hokey suspense-play way. One accepts it not as any possible reality but as a narrative device, overlooking implausible aspects to find out how Levin will answer the many questions - which he does with a certain resourcefulness. Building to the denouement, he stresses sick twists and horrific shocks that are sordid but effective.

Director Josh Morrison strengthens the script's grip with potent pacing and evocative atmosphere. He gives the production the right sense of apprehension and foreboding in the early scenes, with intensifying dread as the action grows more ominous.

Teresa Zimmermann brings credibility to Susan/Veronica - too foolishly sure of her instincts and confident of her safety at the start, later compellingly bedeviled and bewildered.

Stages stalwarts and audience favorites James Belcher and Sally Edmundson contribute splendid character work as the initially twinkly, then increasingly sinister Mackeys. These are protean roles, with a lot of tricky turns one can't discuss without ruining some of the surprises. Let's just say Belcher and Edmundson handle the show's unusual challenges beautifully.

Dwight Clark likewise makes the most of the enigmatic aspects in his role as the strangely detached "boyfriend" whom Susan turns out not to know at all - it's only their second date.

The production values are excellent, with Kirk Domer's haunted sickroom setting (Veronica died there of tuberculosis) and Christina Giannelli's moody lighting particularly helpful.

"Veronica's Room" may be a creepy place to visit - but in this case, the discomfort is entirely intentional.

What if two complete strangers invited you to an isolated manse and requested, for complex and questionable reasons, that you impersonate a long-dead woman named Veronica?

Personally, I'd have to refuse, as I envision the whole intrigue coming to a bad end.

But not *The Girl*, the all-too-acquiescent, vulnerable and increasingly victimized heroine of "Veronica's Room." Perhaps it's because she's just too eager for adventure, or that she fancies herself an actress ("I played Cordelia in high school.") For whatever reason, she lacks the common sense that would keep most people out of such a predicament. But, of course, that's what makes her a natural heroine for the suspense genre - you know, the sort who's just got to find out for herself what's in the Forbidden Chamber that everyone's been warned not to enter.

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Ira Levin's thriller, which ran three months on Broadway in 1973, is getting a relatively rare, and reasonably effective, revival at Stages. It may not persuade you that this comparatively neglected entry is a great thriller. Yet it makes the case that "Veronica's Room" is a good-enough thriller - one that keeps you interested enough and keeps you guessing enough.

Set in 1973, the play begins as young Susan and her boyfriend, Larry, arrive as guests at the Brabissant mansion, invited by the Mackeys, an elderly couple who have served as caretakers for 50 years. While Susan and Larry were dining at a restaurant, the Mackeys approached and introduced themselves, with a peculiar request. They're struck by her uncanny resemblance to Veronica, the Brabissants' daughter who died in 1935. Because the sole surviving Brabissant, Veronica's age-addled sister, believes Veronica is still alive, the Mackeys implore Susan to impersonate Veronica for a brief time to bring peace of mind to sister Cecelia.

As Mr. Mackey leads Larry downstairs for a drink, Mrs. Mackey helps Susan into the dead woman's clothes, rearranges her hair in an appropriate style, and Susan is left alone to "practice" being Veronica. (If you don't want to learn anything more about the plot, stop reading.)