



Review: SWITZERLAND at STAGES HOUSTON

A chilling psychological drama about Patricia Highsmith

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SWITZERLAND is a psychological thriller where author Patricia Highsmith faces an over eager young publishing executive who wants her to pen one last Tom Ripley novel before she dies. The two become locked in a cat and mouse game of threatening and helping each other in equal doses. On the surface the show asks us to guess which one will make it out alive. But even deeper, **SWITZERLAND** asks us to meditate on what the legacy of an artist does to their soul. Can Patricia Highsmith who wrote endlessly about murder and violence retain any kind of moral compass? And does any business deal have any morality at all? **SWITZERLAND** is an intriguing show, and made all the more curious as it is artistic director Kenn McLaughlin's last offering before leaving Stages. At the back of my mind, I wonder what he is trying to tell us about his own creative resume.

The play uses Patricia Highsmith, a real life Texas legend who authored a multitude of psychological thriller and crime stories such as *Strangers on a Train* and what has been known as "the Ripliad". She is most celebrated as the author of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* which

has been made into several film adaptations. Famously, Patricia was a misanthrope who moved away to live isolated in Switzerland for the last thirteen years of her life. She died very ill with lung cancer and aplastic anemia in 1995. Highsmith was a complicated creature who was unapologetically racist, anti-semitic, and a self-loathing lesbian. For all of her achievements, she seemed to hate the world with vitriol.

Act one opens in her late years, and Highsmith is portrayed by Stages Houston legend [Sally Edmundson](#). She's been a creative muse for director Kenn McLaughlin his entire career. The actress who has been known for comedic roles in MAME and STEEL MAGNOLIAS is playing against type. Yet Edmundson brings enough of her own charm to make the audience begrudgingly like Patricia Highsmith, maybe even love her more than she loathes herself. The brilliance of Kenn McLaughlin using her is that Sally can get away with murder, and we won't mind. Even when her character spews awful racist bile we don't flinch nearly as much as we would expect. Edmundson gives a complicated woman a straight-forward performance, and it works very well. She is haunting as Highsmith, and the play works thanks to her fearless take. She is willing to go into a void bringing herself along, and not afraid of what that says. Seeing Sally in dramatic action is an experience, and fondling weapons while laughing may be her new signature move.

Across from her is young actor Ian James, ironically a former student of Kenn McLaughlin. He was last seen at STAGES in 2019's SEX WITH STRANGERS, and it is good to see him return. He has to play a young publishing executive desperate to get the author back in the saddle to write a new Ripley novel, and he's willing to do whatever that takes to get there. The script demands his character change throughout the show, and the actor does this with aplomb. I hardly recognized him from the final moments as the same man in the first, and it is a jaw-dropping transformation to witness. Where Sally keeps Highsmith faithfully concrete, Ian is mercurial and adaptive. He is a mystery all to himself, and that is part of the most fascinating aspect to SWITZERLAND.

These two actors have to do an extended dance of trust and mistrust in a cycle that seethes with emotional and possible physical violence. They volley across a stage in the full round, and make us feel the tension and the chemistry in equal doses. McLaughlin has staged it in a creative way to account for the four angles the audience is configured in. It is a vicious circle where the actors have nowhere to hide. Directorially he has chosen to pay homage to movie thrillers and mysteries, and it works wonders. The set from Kirk Domer is minimal, but terribly effective at invoking a Swiss compound. [Leah Smith](#)'s costumes work overtime to bring the characters to life. She deserves as much kudos as the actors for her work in helping SWITZERLAND move so well. Her outfits are essential to enhancing the performance of both characters. Ricjuane Jenkins creates a soundscape that adds so much as well. There is a maddening clock that ratchets up the tension throughout the evening. Jodi Brobovsky also contributes with excellent weapons work for props. Destiny Smith provides a stark harsh

lighting grid that reveals the two characters unflinchingly. It's a pale cold world, and all the better to ferret out a mystery in.

The brilliance of the script for SWITZERLAND from [Joanna Murray-Smith](#) is it truly captures the style of Patricia Highsmith. Warts and all, here is the famous author right in front of us. I was expecting a thriller along the lines of MISERY, but in the end the psychological aspects of SWITZERLAND are such that make it a chiller instead. It is far more about psychological violence rather than physical. Kenn McLaughlin, [Sally Edmundson](#), and Ian James make a great team to bring it to life. It is something different than what you expect, and there is a delicious mystery you will never expect revealed. More than anything else this show asks us what to make of artists, and what artists make of themselves. If you are a fan of Patricia Highsmith's writing, an author, or anyone who creates art it should hit you in an unflinching way. This is a dark and delicious ride. That it marks the end of Kenn McLaughlin's directorial reign at Stages Houston just makes it that much more bittersweet. He's given us a mysterious breath of miasma to meditate on after he leaves.

SWITZERLAND runs through November 12th at Stages Houston. Seating is in the round, and I would advise audience members to choose the lower levels if possible. There are no bad seats, but being eye level with the actors is a rare treat the balcony does not afford. Stages has a parking garage attached with a fee, and a full bar that offers light snacks. The show runs approximately two hours with one fifteen minute intermission.

Photo by Melissa Taylor