

[STAGE](#)

Switzerland at Stages: Where All the Twists and Turns May Leave You Hanging

[ADA ALOZIE](#) OCTOBER 13, 2023 6:08AM



Patricia Highsmith (Sally Edmundson), Photo by Melissa Taylor Photography



Patricia Highsmith (Sally Edmundson) muses about her life to nervous Edward (Ian James), Photo by Melissa Taylor Photography

For Joanna Murray-Smith's **Switzerland**, directed by Stages outgoing Artistic Director Kenn McLaughlin, the stage has been minimally transformed into the eclectic Swiss home of a self-exiled American writer.

In 1994, the reclusive Patricia Highsmith (Sally Edmundson) receives a visit from Edward (Ian James), an ambitious publishing assistant determined to convince Highsmith to write another Mr. Ripley novel.

She's struggling to write, but when she does, it's on a typewriter.

A typewriter in any play means that the writer is a sarcastic, misanthropic, insensitive jerk who casually insults others as part of their charm, and Highsmith is just that. She says who she is with enough attitude to distract from the fact that most of what is learned is surface level.

Due to this, Edmundson has nowhere to go with her performance. Her strong start has nothing to do but peter out. Her stamina dwindles and perhaps due to opening night



Patricia Highsmith (Sally Edmundson) annoyed by Edward's persistence.
Photo by Melissa Taylor Photography

jitters the line flubs come with more regularity. Her performance stays one-note despite the humorous line deliveries.

When the idealistic Edward meets her, he can't help but fawn over her writing. Since the stage is in the round, most of what I witnessed from James was his back.

Edward believes that his earnest appreciation for her work is enough to convince her to sign a publishing contract. Allergic to sincerity, she questions his genuine interest in her. Does he really care about her novels, or is he a lackey of the publishing company?

First, she wants to kick him out, then he divulges a tragic childhood story that influences her to let him stay a little while longer in her house. Not because she's compassionate but because the details of his misfortune excite her.

In the midst of reveling in his tragedy, it's revealed that they share a mutual fondness for vintage weapons which leads her to suddenly decide she'd like help from him in imagining new ideas for a Ripley novel.

As they share ideas for new possibilities, she invites him to stay in an extra room of her home. They passionately discuss the importance of writing and the ego of the writer as they struggle for

dominance. While he marvels at the power of writers to create worlds from words, she pontificates over the writer's role as beyond moral compass.



Edward (Ian James) pleading his case to Highsmith (Sally Edmundson) to write another sequel. Photo by Melissa Taylor Photography

The two speak not to understand or listen to each other. Instead, each is most interested in getting their point across. Their arguments are interesting perspectives on writing and the authority of the writer particularly when discussing her work on Tom Ripley.

All conversations lead back to whether she will write another. Tom Ripley is the unofficial

third character. When the characters imagine scenarios with him, the lights dim (Destiny Smith) and ominous music (Ricjuane Jenkins) plays. Ripley haunts the play in those moments just as he haunts her career.

They continue to push each other's boundaries until the final twist allows the winner to take control of their story.

The impact of the final twist lessens when for the whole play, an actor's performance and facial expressions were obscured and it was never clear what he looked like to begin with. It lessens even more when Edmundson suddenly takes a sharp character turn that essentially neuters her. The stark character changes for each happen without build which yes creates shock. But it's a shock from disbelief not clear execution.

The choice to stage the show in the round means that the two actors should have been spread around the stage more so that each side could grasp the full dynamic of the characters and their dynamic.

In a two-hander where the writing and the actors' performances are paramount to the central to the success of the show, both the script and the staging hampered the full potential of the actors.

Performances continue through November 12 at 7:30 p.m Wednesdays and Thursdays. 8 p.m Fridays and Saturdays and 2:30 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays at Stages. 800 Rosine. For more information call, 713-527-0220 or visit stageshouston.com \$30-\$84.