

THE SHOWBUZZ

ICT's 'The Angel Next Door' strikes a charming balance

By Sean McMullen

When the walls are thin and the lies run thick, a couple of playwrights baring their anxieties while trying to keep their bathrobes closed and their reputations intact, can't seem to catch a break.

Paul Slade Smith's "The Angel Next Door" — receiving its lively Los Angeles premiere at International City Theatre — embraces that grand theatrical tradition of shouting "quiet!" while stomping around like a herd of tap-dancing elephants. And reader, I ate up every absurd, affectionate minute of it.

Smith is no stranger to backstage bedlam. Before he started typing out door-slamming farces like "Unnecessary Farce" and civic send-ups like "The Outsider," he was on Broadway, juggling top hats in "My Fair Lady" and slinging pixie dust in "Finding Neverland."

He's trod the boards in "Willy Wonka" and racked up more than 500 productions of his three published plays — a résumé that explains why his new script, chock-full of insider jokes, never feels

like an inside joke.

That is because it is a love letter, to theatre people, and what we do best — talk about theatre.

Director Cate Caplin knows exactly how to keep that actor-centric engine humming. She doesn't so much block scenes as choreograph them, turning the Sanders' condo into a ticking comic time-bomb. Paper-thin walls, thunderous egos, and one over-eager guardian angel combine in a perfect storm of theatre dreams gone wrong.

At the vortex of that storm are married playwrights Charlotte and Arthur Sanders, rendered in glorious technicolor by Meeghan Holaway and Geoffrey Lower. Holaway's Charlotte is every playwright who has ever loved a blank page until it betrayed her.

She tilts between blazing determination and the kind of brittle panic only creative people can manage at 2 a.m. when a script is due at 9. Lower, meanwhile, drapes Arthur in a wry weariness — think Nick Charles after three martinis — yet keeps the embers of artistic pride glowing beneath the dead-

IF YOU GO

Tickets: \$56 on Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays; \$59 on Sundays.

Info: ictlongbeach.org.

pan.

Together they move like a vaudeville duo who've rehearsed the bit one too many times and still can't resist cracking each other up.

But Smith's script is a democracy, and the rest of the ensemble votes early and often. Armand Akbari's Oliver Adams is the human embodiment of a friendly typo: Well-intentioned, adorably earnest, and somehow always in the wrong place. Jessica Fishenfeld, as diva-next-door Margot Bell, wields her soprano like a saber — each high note a wink, each shrug a miniature aria.

Nick Lunetta turns Victor Pratt into the kind of smug fellow who would monogram his yoga mat, if they had those in 1948. And then there's SKY Palkowitz as Olga Molnar, the titular 'scene stealer', in the best way possible. Palkowitz plays

her as though Groucho Marx and Mary Poppins shared a bizarre but delightful dream.

Director Caplin lets these six ping off one another like ricocheting champagne corks. With all its brilliant but frenetic energy, the production strikes a charming balance between absurdist humor and heartfelt moments.

Is the piece groundbreaking? Probably not. Smith isn't interested in reinventing the wheel; he's polishing it until you can see your own theatrical foibles reflected back. That meta-wink — characters complaining about how plays never solve anything while frantically trying to solve everything — gives the evening a fizz reminiscent of "Noises Off" with a kinder, gentler hang-over.

Like any good farce, "The Angel Next Door" ends a hair's breadth from calamity and a heartbeat away from redemption. We stumble out into the lobby reminded that truth is fragile, art even more so, and that sometimes thin walls don't just let in the noise — they let in the truth.

A good reminder to just keep laughing.