

# Explosive 'Taken' draws you in

By ANN BENNETT  
THEATER REVIEWER

Two splendid actors, an intensely sensitive play and impeccable direction come together at the Actors' Theatre in downtown Santa Cruz in an outstanding production that reminds us of what live theater can achieve when all the right elements come together. It doesn't happen that often in local productions — and when it does, it's awesome.

Director Brian Spencer's choice of "Taken In," by John W. Lowell, is a fine one. It is also a very challenging choice, as the playwright's taut script uses a somewhat unusual construction — much of the dialogue is directed to the audience, not as narration but as casual participatory conversation — and the play, with only two characters, obviously depends on outstanding stage skills for its success.

Lowell's play is, on the surface, deceptively simple. A serious, conventional 30-something gay man moved by the plight of a sexy young street hustler finds himself offering protective friendship and shelter.

But the emotional complexities of the plot are

## If You Go

**WHAT:** 'Taken In.'

**WHERE:** Actors' Theatre, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz.

**WHEN:** 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, 3 p.m. Sundays, through March 25.

**COST:** \$17 general, \$14 seniors and students; Thursdays are \$20 two-for-one or \$12 for single tickets.

**DETAILS:** 425-PLAY.

explosive, and the play moves through these with care and poignancy, exploring the men's individual motivations and the intricacies of their relationship with fine balance.

Marc believes his intentions are purely charitable and unselfish; the arrangement is not a sexual one. But while he maintains this stance, he also remains acutely aware of the implicit suggestion of "sex for shelter" that pervades the offer and its troubling effects on both himself and the boy.

Danny, whose insolent self-confidence belies his vulnerability, wavers between wistful acceptance of friendship and his personal need to exploit and explain any relationship in

terms of sex and self-interest.

The play simmers with emotion as Marc attempts to explore his true intentions and Danny challenges all efforts to guide him out of a self-destructive life.

The men are both superb actors. Daniel D. Hughes plays Marc with sober and clearly painful deliberation. His control is perfect as he vacillates between what he wants to believe is pure kindness and the suspicion that his true motivation could actually lie elsewhere. As he searches for his personal truth, he exposes his own vulnerability with excellent perception.

As Danny, Michael Olavson offers up an outstanding performance. Unable to trust and unwilling to accept, he portrays Danny with swaggering beauty.

It's a quixotic role, one that requires him to be both victim and villain, and Olavson handles this dichotomy with sweet gravity. His stance is of barely restrained power, carefully masking his fear and defenselessness.

Every movement is contrived and audacious, and just watching him on the stage is a delight.

The compact and attractive set by Mark Hopkins uses the small Actors' Theatre space well, with a comfortably appointed living area for most of the action and mere suggestions of other scenes. Kyle Grant's lighting enhances this efficient use of the stage, and Mark Bradlyn's impressive music contributes to the mood.

Brian Spencer's choice of "Taken In" is a fine one. The drama is both provocative and contemplative and the playwright's stylistic approach to delivery is unusually successful. As director, Spencer is clearly alert to the nuances of timing and pacing necessary to make this unique staging work for both his cast and his audience.

Additionally, he has the ability to inspire two excellent actors to outstanding performances, as Hughes and Olavson work together to provide the depth and vision of the drama.

"Taken In" is a poignant look at motivation and self-deception and the effects of each as part of our search for love — or maybe just for gratification.

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