

Theater Review

Philandering and Lies in the Common Room

South Park Theatre triumphs with the hilarious *It Runs in the Family*

IT RUNS IN THE FAMILY

Written by Ray Cooney
South Park Theatre, South Hills
Through August 4
412.831.8552

By Gabriel Davis

Lies, lies, lies. These are the little things that lead to big trouble, and big laughs, in Ray Cooney's *It Runs in the Family*. Cooney's play takes its audience into the doctor's common room of Saint Andrew's Hospital in London. A pleasant area, equipped with a well stocked bar and a grand view out the back window revealing Big Ben, the space is intended as a kind of decompression chamber where the doctors unwind between patients and at the end of a long day. However, when a former nurse — one Jane Tate — finds her way into the room, it becomes a pressure cooker of dramatic tension.

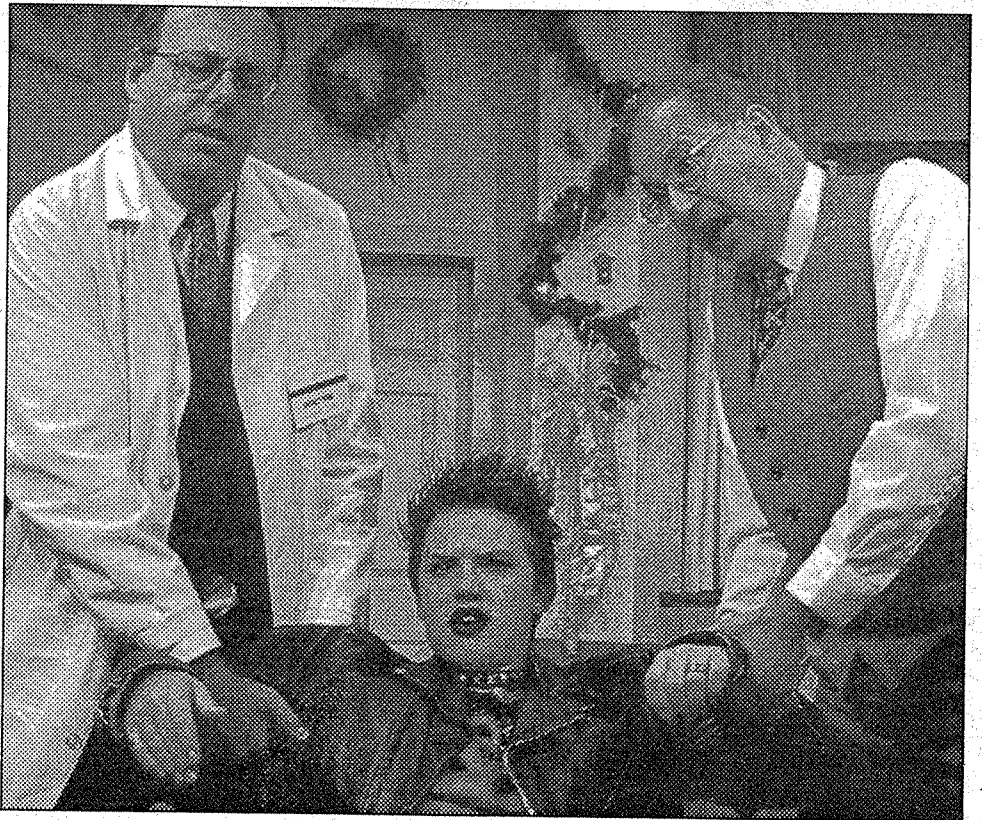
The play's anti-hero is former philanderer/neurologist David Mortimore. A man on his way to the top, Dr. Mortimore has been chosen to give St. Andrew's Hospital's annual address to a slew of government delegates and over 200 of his most prominent colleagues in the field of neurology.

Sir Willoughby Drake, Mortimore's alcohol-guzzling superior, lets the doctor know in no uncertain terms that, if his speech wins the respect of the neurologists in attendance and helps the hospital get a boatload of funding, he too will certainly be a "Sir" — that is, he will be knighted.

The play unfolds in real time, a little over an hour and a half before Dr. Mortimore's address. Everything is going well for him until his philandering past returns to bite him in the buttocks. The aforementioned Jane Tate, a philanderee, pops in right before the most important moment of his life to tell him: "Surprise, I got pregnant 18 years ago with your son, kind of failed to mention it then and now he's downstairs in the custody of a police officer. Will you please escort him to the station?" Not in those words exactly, but that's the idea.

It seems Miss Tate raised a baby boy named Leslie under the false belief that his father had died while climbing the Himalayas. When that baby turned 18, she told him the truth: that his father is a doctor at St. Andrews. Desperate to meet dad — and hopped up on champagne, pills and a half bottle of gin — Leslie makes a scene at the hospital. He escapes from the police officer and is about to burst through the common room door at any minute.

Enter Mortimore's wife, Rosemary. Not surprisingly, the lies really kick in here.



Terry Sheldon and Ronald Fernandez try to move the rowdy Stephen Arthur in *It Runs in the Family*.

Mortimore tells her that Jane Tate is a lady named Mrs. Leslie, who can't find her ill husband anywhere in the hospital. Rosemary then forces him to send a nurse to look for the fictitious Mr. Leslie. Later, Mortimore tells his bumbling colleague Dr. Bonney that Leslie is the name of Jane Tate's dog. And, finally, when the real Leslie enters in a violent temper, he tells the young man that he couldn't possibly be his father, as his father is a doctor and he's only a priest recovering from gout and piles. And it gets crazier — a lot crazier.

Perhaps the best moment occurs when the nurse actually finds a patient named Mr. Leslie — an ancient, infirm, very horny old man in a wheelchair. The old fellow thinks the doctor's common room is his new quarters and refuses to leave throughout the rest of the play.

As Mortimore, Ronald Fernandez is never too over the top, but hits each comic note with ease, entering the zany flow of Cooney's farce without feeling compelled to become a complete cartoon in the process — thank heavens. As the engine of this show, he makes this production as funny on the stage as it is potentially on the page. Playing his wife, Rosemary Mortimore, Diann Burke smacks of Hillary Clinton in appearance and exudes charm in manner.

Ross Blumen is hysterical in the role of Mr. Leslie, creating a lascivious, shaky-handed, alcohol-loving geezer, who helps himself to the

bar and squirts people with the seltzer water for fun, doing everything he can to gum up the works for Dr. Mortimore. His performance had me gasping for air between guffaws and holding my aching ribs.

Terry Sheldon is brilliant as the bumbling Bonney; Sheldon is the kind of actor whose joy at playing his role shines through. His uncomfortable, held pauses during bouts of laughter from the audience fit his character perfectly and spurred the audience toward more laughter.

Shelby Wyzykowski gives the role of Jane Tate simplicity and grace. She certainly doesn't seem a troublemaker with her demure demeanor and coquettish smile. As Leslie, Stephen Arthur is fearsome and lovable; he creates an emotionally on-edge character with an essentially good, if needy, heart. In fact, Lynne DeBree's direction makes the whole cast into a strong ensemble.

The only criticism of this play can be attributed to the writing. While Act One is solid, and alone worth the nine bucks admission, Act Two falters a bit. The police sergeant sums up events and information that his character would not know. And having the lead characters disguised in drag is funny at first, but it gets old fast in this play.

Still, I left with a smile on my face and the bad bits are brief enough. You should sit through them for the "laughers' high" this play promises to deliver.