

Legit Reviews

the man of few words, played with nicely measured reactions by Casey. She could be speaking to the audience, too, as Ashley works the room in every sense of the word. She is solicitous, playful, demanding, self-absorbed, provocative and ultimately transfixing as she recalls the passions, both grand and petty, of her prime. The old Zerline is a tough, rough, unsentimental peasant who has no illusions about the ways of class and privilege. But memories of sex and sin are seen in a different light.

Watch the decades dissolve as Ashley dreamily, hungrily, sensually tells of the time when she planned to bed — and perhaps even wed — the lover of the baroness, who fathered the illegitimate daughter. Delusion and desire conspire in a scene that is the work's high point in storytelling and performance.

When murder enters the picture, things get complicated for all involved, including the baroness's husband, an upstanding and noble judge who appears to stand above mere matters of the flesh. Up until then, he is a minor figure in the story, but his character becomes a significant factor in the play's intertwining moral universe.

A further reveal at the end gives the story an intriguing narrative and thematic twist. But its psychological notion of saints and sinners lacks sufficient heft to totally sell the play, despite the best efforts of the star, helmer Michael Wilson and a first-rate design team.

Alexander Dodge designs a finely detailed set that draws audience into the confines of the tenant's faded-elegant room while conjuring up a mysterious beyond as Zerline enters her dark and dangerous past. Howell Binkley's lighting and John Gromada's intoxicating music also add dimension to the haunted tale.

restaurants that are routinely killing off members of the black community; and defiantly manic Denise, apparently unable to hold down a new job for a single day.

Jasmine (Chesser) doubles as Chrystal, a lusty black woman under a blond weave who insists she is really white. And in one of the darker episodes, she plays Phylicia, an imprisoned murderess on death row. A linking narrative finds Jasmine boasting over a pair of tickets to a Nina Simone concert, which is ultimately canceled by the singer's sudden passing, prompting snippets of the late diva's songs.

Camblin's witty writing is incisive and expansive. She speaks knowingly of her subjects, celebrating the joy, pride and humor of the black experience. The humor gains in comic intensity with misfit Denise, while the only cry of pain is found in the confessional of the jailed Phylicia, played with somber resignation by Chesser. Working on Charles Corcoran's set of a functionally mirrored two-chair salon, director Kamilah Forbes has given the piece pace and thrust.

Television: Brian Lowry



TruTV's "The Real Hustle" series uses hidden cameras to demonstrate how scam artists ply their trade.

The Real Hustle

(Series; truTV, Tue. Jan. 22, 10 p.m.)

Produced by Objective Prods. and Crook Prods. in association with Court TV Original Prods. Executive producers, Anthony Owen, Matt Crook, Andrew O'Connor; series producer, Jon Richards; series director, Justin Gorman; production designers, Jon Huggins, Chris Potter. 30 MIN.

With: Apollo Robbins, Ryan Oakes, Dani Marco.
Narrator: Phil Tanzini.

The network formerly known as Court TV finds a program right in its wheelhouse with "The Real Hustle," which essentially plays like a magic show with a semi-educational consumer-protection hook. A trio of scam artists stage various hidden-camera stings on unsuspecting New Yorkers — picking pockets, pilfering credit-card info and prompting personal introspection tethered to each half-hour's signature line: "How much could they get ... from you?" The channel is attempting to re-brand itself as a more liberating all-reality destination, and "Hustle" plays like an assured step in that direction.

Of course, there is one major drawback to the show — which consists of eight episodes scheduled as back-to-back half-hours — namely, that beyond warning consumers about the risks they face from unscrupulous parties, it also illustrates ways people can be swindled, ideally without going quite so far as to provide a "how-to" component. Then again, you can't make reality TV without breakin' a few eggs, right?

Apollo Robbins is billed as an "expert pickpocket and personal security consultant," and he's paired with Ryan Oakes (who's basically a magician) and Dani Marco, an actress "skilled in distraction techniques," which sounds like a fancy of way of saying when it comes to attractive women, men are idiots.

As in Sci Fi Channel's "Mind Control With Derren Brown," part of the intrigue surrounds the psychology of the various cons — the ways people can be manipulated, fooled and distracted, especially if they're sauntering across a busy Manhattan intersection gabbing away on a cell phone.

Like so much reality TV, the show is overproduced, from repeated shots of the leads posing for the camera to the "Jaws"-like music that accompanies each operation. Still, as constructed, the series proves slick and fast-paced, taking full advantage of its hidden-camera facilities to provide various angles on Robbins' and Oakes' dexterous doings. (Stolen money is quickly returned, though you wonder whether, if this goes on long enough, someone will punch out one of the perpetrators before they can complete the "It's all for TV, be a good sport!" explanation.)

By the way, a show about cons and scams, produced by guys with names like Matt Crook and Andrew O'Connor? After watching an hour of "The Real Hustle," it's tempting to be suspicious of just about everything.

Sundance Review

The Wackness

Continued from page 4

who both have some maturing to do and prove oddly adept at nudging each other in that direction.

Kingsley has a ball with Squires' gonzo character, getting a bizarre makeover session with Mary-Kate Olsen as a barely legal Central Park hippie chick. Jane Adams also makes an impression as another pot buyer who clicks with the doctor. Janssen doesn't get a lot to do, but Thirlyby is appealing

as a girl both precociously assured and uncertain what she wants. While Peck somewhat oversells the glaze-eyed stoner act, he's nonetheless a most appealing protagonist.

Design elements are very well turned, with Petra Korner's desaturated widescreen lensing, Josh Noyes' diverse editorial approaches, David Torn's ethereal original score and other contributions conveying the characters' emotional precariousness during a Manhattan heatwave summer.



"Zerline's Tale" stars Elizabeth Ashley in the titular role of a servant woman who has secrets to dish out to a boarder and the audience.

Zerline's Tale

(Hartford Stage; 385 seats; \$64 top)

A Hartford Stage presentation of a play one act, adapted by Jeremy Sams from the story "Die Erzählung der Megd Zerline," in the book "Die Schuldlosen (The Guiltless)" by Hermann Broch. Directed by Michael Wilson. Sets, Alexander Dodge; costumes, Jane Greenwood; lighting, Howell Binkley; original music and sound, John Gromada; production stage manager, Linda Arvel. Opened, reviewed Jan. 19, 2008. Runs through Feb. 10. Running time: 1 HOUR, 5 MIN.

Elizabeth Ashley
Jon David Casey

FRANK RIZZO

Desire is an eternal flame that casts a wicked glow in "Zerline's Tale," a seductive but intimately slight memory play based on a short story from Austrian writer Hermann Broch's book "The Guiltless," adapted by Jeremy Sams. Still, there's nothing like a tantalizing passion-versus-morality play, and this English-language premiere gets a handsome Hartford Stage pro-

duction, along with a transformative performance by Elizabeth Ashley, who summons ghosts of her own in the telling.

It's a juicy role famously played by Jeanne Moreau in Europe in the 1980s. Here, Ashley casts her own powerful spell as Zerline, a crafty old servant woman who recounts to an entranced listener an upstairs/downstairs story of desire, revenge and murder.

Set in 1923 inflation-ridden Germany, the once-affluent and aristocratic household in which Zerline works is now reduced to taking in tenants. The latest is a handsome young visitor simply known as the Man (Jon David Casey), who is the target for Zerline's cautionary tale, one she parcels out with just the right amount of detail and tease as she goes about ostensibly cleaning his room.

She first catches his interest by referring to the widowed baroness's "bastard daughter," whose mysterious ways might even have implications for the boarder.

"I've intrigued you, haven't I?" asks the old and arthritic Zerline to

And Her Hair Went With Her

(Lumia Theater, Long Branch, N.J.; 65 seats; \$35 top)

A New Jersey Repertory Company presentation of a play in one act by Zina Camblin. Directed by Kamilah Forbes. Set, Charles Corcoran; costumes, Patricia E. Dorety; lighting, Jill Nagle; sound, Jessica Paz; production stage manager, Rose Riccardi. Opened, reviewed Jan. 19, 2008. Running time: 1 HOUR, 30 MIN.

Zina Camblin
MaConnia Chesser

ROBERT L. DANIELS

New Jersey Rep's 10th season opener is Zina Camblin's two-hander "And Her Hair Went With Her," which finds a pair ofatty hairdressers engaging in a gambling survey of wigs, weaves, pop culture and some oddly eccentric clients. Playwright Camblin finds MaConnia Chesser as a stylist and shop owner, respectively, who she turns masquerading as salon patrons in a series of thematic sketches. The humor emanates from some rather broad characterizations, unified by the wigs worn



Zina Camblin's two-hander "And Her Hair Went With Her" explores experiences of African-American women in a beauty shop setting.

and the therapeutic values to be found in a beauty parlor chair.

Angie (Camblin) takes on Debbie, a fledgling actress under a long straight wig, preparing an audition for Ntozake Shange's "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf"; obsessive-compulsive Keisha, armed with sanitizing wipes while bemoaning the threat of fast-food