

Friday, September 12, 2008

['Dr. Cook's Garden' Blooms in Arlington](#)

On Wednesday evening, [Tim Hulsey](#) and I saw a new production of a 40-year-old play, *Dr. Cook's Garden*, at the [American Century Theater](#) in Arlington. Here is my review, prepared for *The Metro Herald* (and likely to run in next Friday's print edition):

'Dr. Cook's Garden' Blooms in Arlington

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Now uncovered by the [American Century](#) Theater, for four decades *Dr. Cook's Garden* was a hidden gem that weaves together elements of a psychological thriller, small-town melodrama, philosophical dialogue, and debate about moral values.

Written by Ira Levin (better known for novels like *Rosemary's Baby* and [The Stepford Wives](#), as well as for the long-running play, *Deathtrap*), *Dr. Cook's Garden* had an unfortunate fate in its [original Broadway run](#), which lasted only about a week.

Perhaps 1967 audiences were not ready for the heady questions raised in the play – or for the answers raised in reply.

The challenge for a reviewer of a play like *Dr. Cook's Garden* is to say enough to tantalize audience members and persuade them to see it, but not reveal too much of its tautly-constructed plot or the internal twists that take it from opening curtain to curtain calls.

It can't be done – not adequately, at least.

Suffice it to say that the action of *Dr. Cook's Garden* takes place in a small Vermont town on the day that a former resident, Jim Tennyson, returns for a visit after years away at college and medical school. The plot unreels in the office of the eponymous Dr. Cook, who has been the sole physician in tiny Greenfield Center (think of Grover's Corners) for three decades, and who was Jim's employer, mentor, and inspiration before Jim left for school. In the course of his visit, Jim deduces a secret about Dr. Cook that he never could have imagined – a secret that has consequences for the two of them, for their friends, and for the whole town.



Levin's script is tightly crafted. There is no extraneous dialogue or action in this play. Every sentence in Act I has a payoff or parallel in Act II or Act III. What seems like small-talk or filler turns out to be consequential. Even props that seem merely decorative have substantive uses as the play reaches its climax.

What makes *Dr. Cook's Garden* work best are the relaxed and authentic performances of its cast, under the direction of **Ellen Dempsey**. Under less able hands, the play could turn out to be a macabre yet flaccid melodrama. The second act, which is largely a debate on ethical topics (in the style of an 18th-century philosophical dialogue, but with greater punch and vim), could become plodding. Dempsey makes it swing and energizes it.

To be sure, Dempsey owes much to her cast, none of whose members have previously appeared in an American Century production. [David Schmidt](#), as "Doc" Cook, steers a middle ground between what we might imagine **Burl Ives**' turn at the role in the original Broadway production and [Bing Crosby](#)'s re-creation of it in a [made-for-TV movie](#) a few years later. Schmidt conveys a mild-mannered "country doc" who could have fit in nicely on a 1930s radio soap opera, but one whose surface hides the secret that cannot be revealed here.



As his young counterpart, Jim Tennyson, the actor **JB Bissex** recreates the role originated by [Keir Dullea](#) and offers a physically nuanced performance in which the muscles of his face reveal more information, at times, than the words he speaks.

Supporting these two central characters are [Robert Lavery](#) as Elias Hart, a gardener and town constable whose simple bearing makes one menacing moment both unexpected and logical; **Kathryn Cocroft** as Doc's nurse, Bea, who may (or may not – we never know) be aware of Doc's secret; and **Carol McCaffrey** as housekeeper Dora, whose gift of gab unwittingly turns on Jim's curiosity and, hence, his discovery.

Much of Levin's work is infused with a fear of totalitarian control that threatens individual autonomy, often represented by Nazis or Satanists. Neither is present here, but the underlying concern can be felt. And Levin's social conscience often expresses itself aphoristically. Here are two examples:

Referring to a dysfunctional family, Doc says: "Beatings are handed down like land and money."

Drawing a distinction between two key concepts, Jim remarks: "Gardens go to seed; towns muddle along."

Dr. Cook's Garden was not originally scheduled to be part of TACT's 2008-09 season; it was a last-minute replacement when rights to another Levin play became unavailable. Artistic director [Jack Marshall](#) and his colleagues, however, made a brilliant decision in finding this play and choosing to produce it. As obscure as it once was, it should be so no more. If you are going to see only one play between today and October 4, see *Dr. Cook's Garden*.

Forty years after *Dr. Cook's Garden* opened in New York, this seldom-produced play may finally be ready for an audience – or audiences may finally be ready for it. Despite a few 1960s references that anchor it in that decade, [the central theme](#) of *Dr. Cook's Garden* is perennially relevant. Perhaps it is relevant now more than ever.

Dr. Cook's Garden continues through Saturday, October 4, 2008, at Theatre II, Gunston Arts Center, 2700 S. Lang Street, Arlington, Virginia 22206. Ticket prices range from \$25 to \$32, with discounts available for students and seniors. A performance schedule and ticket information is available at www.americancentury.org. Further ticket information is available by calling 703-998-4555 or sending an email to info@americancentury.org.

In case it is not clear from the foregoing review, I liked *Dr. Cook's Garden*. Go, see it, and tell your friends about it (but don't give away the secrets).