

# REVIEW: VERSATILE ACTING GIVES 'STONES' ITS WEIGHT

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By Loren Keller

Hollywood behind the scenes has been a rich field of exploration in movies like "The Player" and "State and Main" and HBO television series such as "The Larry Sanders Show" and the "Extras."

Riverside Theatre's "Stones in His Pockets" mined that familiar territory onstage Friday night for a near sell-out crowd at the opening of the company's 28th season. "An especially sweet statistic after this summer," said Riverside artistic director Jody Hovland, recalling the June floodwaters that inundated the company's outdoor stage in City Park, forcing the production to quickly relocate to City High School and open the festival just four days later.

Quick change artistry of a different sort was on offer during "Stones in His Pockets," a dark Irish comedy featuring 15 characters played by just two actors; sharing the stage for almost the entirety of the play are Riverside veteran Tim Budd and newcomer Jim Van Valen.

The challenge of inhabiting more than a half-dozen characters each over the course of two 50-minute acts must be physically and mentally taxing—though if either actor was straining to do the job he didn't show it.

Using a simple range of props and minimal costume changes — a scarf, a jacket, a pair of eyeglasses — Budd and Van Valen appeared almost relaxed as they morphed fluidly into their differing roles as the play's plotline adroitly weaved between flashbacks and different character perspectives.

The story takes place in a rural town in County Kerry Ireland, where a Hollywood film crew has employed Charlie Conlon (Budd) and Jake Quinn (Van Valen) as extras in the production of "The Quiet Valley."

A backscreen projects a peaceful pastoral setting of green hills that belies the tumult of the production process and the moviemakers' romanticized visions of a "mystical journey" and "a world he never knew existed, where anything can happen," as hinted at in voiced-over "previews" at the play's beginning.

The reality of that process, as anyone who's spent time on a movie set will tell you, is infinitely less dramatic and glamorous. Especially for an extra such as Charlie, who at the play's beginning is reduced to haggling with the caterer for an extra slice of lemon meringue pie.

Some extras in the production, like Mickey (played with hunched-over enthusiasm by Van Valen) are just happy for the 40 quid a day and free grub; for others like Charlie, playing such tiny parts for drinking money inspires more existential questions. For another of the townsfolk, whose drunken advances at the pub are rejected by the movie's leading lady, dreams of Hollywood are extinguished much more dramatically.

By the playwright's own admission, the nondescript title of the play doesn't say much and isn't very catchy. Unfortunately, the same is somewhat true for Marie Jones' script, which seems a little less inspired (and laugh-inducing) than the actors who perform it. See this one for the acting magic.