

ENTERTAINMENT

'Ding Dongs' succeeds in crafty effort to baffle audience

Jess Childs, /Courtesy photo,

Natalie (Emily K. Harrison) and Joe (Jason Maxwell) make themselves at home in the home of Redelmo (Jack Wefso), right in *The Ding Dongs (or What is the Penalty in Portugal?)*.

By **LIZA WILLIAMS** for *Daily Camera*

April 18, 2013 at 4:23 pm

If you go

3 1/2 stars

What: “*The Ding Dongs (or What is the Penalty in Portugal?)*,” presented by square product theatre

When: 8 p.m. Friday, April 12; 4 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturday, April 13 (The Dairy Center for the Arts, Boulder); 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, April 25-May 4 (work/space at Laundry on Lawrence, Denver)

Where: Carsen Theater at The Dairy Center for the Arts, 2590 Walnut St., Boulder, and work/space at Laundry on Lawrence, 2701 Lawrence St., Denver

Tickets: \$14-\$18 (two-for-one Thursdays)

Info: 303-444-7328 or thedairy.org; 800-838-3006 or

dingdongs.brownpapertickets.com

Parents' guide: Appropriate for teens

Would you think twice about performing an action as everyday and innocent as answering a doorbell? Maybe you should. In the case of “*The Ding Dongs (or What is the Penalty in Portugal?)*,” presented by square product theatre, it seems you definitely should.

A couple arrives at a door, the man claiming the house is his childhood home. The occupant of the house, Redelmo, is anxious to keep the couple out, despite their insistence they look around. They are high-strung and passive-aggressive. Once the couple, Joe and Natalie, have gotten a tiny toehold into a social interaction with Redelmo, a twisted and bizarre — but very effective and elaborate — scheme begins to unfold.

Slowly, point by point and inch by inch, the takeover is implemented.

None of the characters in this play is reliable. Whether they are lying provides emotional subtext for each line. The action and story stay unpredictable, and for the entire evening I could in no way anticipate which direction the action would take. I found myself holding my breath, squirming uneasily because Jason Maxwell — he is excellent as Joe, whose wild mood swings and quick switching of tactics drags the audience on a wild ride — and Emily K. Harrison, who portrays Natalie, play the creepiest, most confounding, passive-aggressive of couples. Their performances bring to perfection circular, diversion-driven argument. If you have ever had an argument with someone where you can't get any headway or footing on an agreed-upon reality, this play will resonate with you.

"Ding Dongs" addresses many issues. I found myself questioning not only the legitimacy of property rights, which is a major theme in the play, but also the legacy of victimization. Ownership is completely dependent on how you define things, Natalie says amid a bait-and-switch argument. Random boxes addressed to Joe and Natalie arrive at Redelmo's home, who objects that he didn't order them. In an argument that follows its own strange logic, Natalie answers, "I didn't order sleepless nights, but they are still mine." Huh?

Redelmo (Jack Wefso) becomes confused and angry. Yet, for some reason, he doesn't think to call the police until the couple have accumulated enough circumstantial evidence that the house would be perceived to be theirs by any authority figure, who would more likely believe them than the actual occupant of the house. Each time Redelmo becomes angry and tries to throw them out, he is told to relax, to calm down.

Most of all, the real highlight of the evening is a long, forcefully performed monologue in which Harrison reveals her depth as an actress. She brings the audience into Natalie's experience, providing a sweet twist on our assumptions about motive and opportunity. Her performance is riveting.

The sound design for this show also was key to the ominous feel: The house itself seemed to breathe and intrude the psyche. In the end, Joe and Natalie tell Redelmo, "We want your version of a sudden and irreversible expulsion to be better than ours." The play upends any sense that there is a common set of rules regarding property rights, personal behavior or even citizenry that can be counted on: "We are all displaced everyday."