

GO ROSE COTTAGES

Ian Flanders

With its towering trees, intermittent birdsong and starry ceiling, Theatricum Botanicum's bucolic amphitheater is a wonderfully ironic venue for a play set in a dumpy tourist motel in South Florida. Theatricum's production marks the West Coast premiere of playwright Bill Bozzone's slightly offbeat and somewhat sentimental comedy about the human urge to form replacement families when our families of origin and matrimony disappoint or disappear. Rose (an inspired Earnestine Phillips) fears her dilapidated motel will be shuttered when a health inspector

(Maurice Shaw) notes faulty plumbing and other violations. Panicked and pissed off, Rose begins to rebuild hope when Jessie (Ellen Geer), a motel guest abandoned by her New Jersey cop son (Aaron Hendry) and his selfish, tarty wife (Savannah Southern Smith), befriends her. Enter Lydell (Graco Hernandez), a lonely teen with a knack for odd jobs, who completes the reconstructed family unit. Bozzone worked with Theatricum and re-wrote the role of Rose for a female, a choice that adds a nice layer of complexity to the already plucky script. Though the story veers toward oversimplification of human pain at times, Bozzone smartly redeems sappy situations with left-of-center humor. When Lydell reveals to Rose that his father is a complete zero, for instance, we expect tears and tales of tattered rainbows; instead we get an entirely unexpected story about dad's feigned shooting of Santa Claus, and it's a scream. The cast is solid across the board, with Geer and Phillips winning equal leading lady kudos for layering their characters. Heidi Helen Davis directs with straightforward simplicity, though the pacing lags near play's end. Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum, 1419 Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga; in rep, call for schedule; thru Oct. 2. (310) 455-3723. theatricum.com. (Amy Lyons)