



Noble Fool's 'Red Herring' reels in the laughs

By Scott C. Morgan | Daily Herald Staff

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"Red Herring"

★★★½

Location: Noble Fool Theatricals at Pheasant Run Resort, 4051 E. Main St., St. Charles, (630) 584-6342, noblefool.org

Showtimes: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 2 p.m. Sunday (also Sept. 30 and Oct. 7) through Oct. 24

Running time: About two hours and 10 minutes with intermission

Tickets: \$29-\$39; \$46-\$56 dinner packages

Parking: Free nearby parking lots

Rating: Sexual themes and profanity makes this one for teens and older

Audiences who find themselves in a continual state of laughing bliss during Noble Fool Theatricals' "Red Herring" probably won't care about a couple of discernible faults in Michael Hollinger's Cold War-set mystery comedy.

Which gives all the more credit to the superb staging of this clever film noir-inspired comedy by Noble Fool (soon to be renamed the Fox Valley Repertory in January).

Previously seen in 2005 at Northlight Theatre in Skokie, "Red Herring" makes for a perfectly felicitous fit at

Pheasant Run Resort. And that is in large part because director John Gawlik has cast a superskilled ensemble of versatile character actors who ingeniously illustrate Hollinger's comic gallery of tough-talking dames, hard-boiled detectives, wide-eyed ingénues and self-righteous spies.

Gawlik gets things started on the right foot with a funny filmed movie-credit sequence featuring a slew of St.

Charles landmarks like the Hotel Baker and the Arcada

Theatre. "Red Herring" then switches into a series of scenes that play like wonderfully timed comedy sketches spoofing a wide net of targets ranging from Cold War spy caper clichés to the so-called innocence of the Eisenhower era.

"Red Herring" hinges on two seemingly divergent cases faced by the dating couple of police detective Maggie (Rebekah Ward-Hayes) and FBI agent Frank (Sean Bolger). Maggie seeks to solve a murder mystery with some potentially personal ramifications, while Frank is out to break a spy ring passing along hydrogen bomb building secrets to the Communists.

Among the shady characters encountered are the devious landlady Mrs. Kravitz (Danon Dastuge) and her "mute" boyfriend Andrei (Peter DeFaria). Meanwhile, the seemingly all-American military scientist James (Alex Hugh Brown) tries to convince his swooning and superpatriotic fiancée, Lynn (Elana Ernst), to be a mole in passing along secret bomb blueprints.

The acting sextet knows how to perfectly push the absurdity of the different situations without overplaying the multiple characters (and caricatures) assigned to them. You know you're in great hands in the wedding dress shop scene when Dastuge's domineering clerk gets a laugh from nearly every utterance, while DeFaria as her henpecked husband can inspire giggles just by shuffling out on stage.

Everything in Noble Fool's "Red Herring" looks wonderful, too. Credit goes largely to Kimberly G. Morris and her stylish period costumes, John Horan's moody lighting and designer Dan Conley's dock-sized unit set that is accented by Liviu Pasare's films and projection design.

And those faults with "Red Herring"? Hollinger spends so much time crafting jokes and gags that he neglects making any of the characters genuine people that you truly care about. The scattershot momentum also doesn't build much suspense since Hollinger's attention is focused more on getting laughs than a strong linear plot.

But like I said, you probably won't be complaining since "Red Herring" keeps the comedy coming. Noble Fool's excellent execution of "Red Herring" is a rich comic dish worth savoring.