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Hollywood in the '50s is slightly musty in 'All Save One'

Laura Giannarelli as Claire Morgan and Lawrence Redmond as John Grant in "All Save One." (C. Stanley Photography)

By **Celia Wren**

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Life has grown complicated for the British-emigre characters at the center of "All Save One," Greg Jones Ellis's comedy-drama about Hollywood in 1950. Aging protagonist Sims Glendenning, a writer, knows his scripts are passe. His actress wife, Claire, is having an affair, and his secretary and erstwhile lover Basil feels neglected. As if that weren't enough to cope with, the young man who is Sims's latest protege has taken to howling like a dog. Listen! He's at it again!

The offstage howls are a welcome kooky touch in this otherwise tidy repartee-packed play, making its world premiere in a Washington Stage Guild production that smacks of artifice. "All Save One" touches on serious themes, including fear of aging and the vulnerability of gay people in the face of 1950s homophobia. The play's dialogue and dramaturgy, however, are straight out of drawing-room comedy: Amusing zingers abound, and there's an old-fashioned quality to the carefully crafted pattern of revelation, repercussion and tension. The retro style isn't intrinsically a bad thing, but it has the side effect of underscoring the stagy acting in key roles in director Carl Randolph's production, making for a musty theatrical experience.

WSG Artistic Director Bill Largess turns in a particularly creaky performance as Sims, a world-famous scribbler who is in Hollywood to contribute to a movie adaptation of his work. A sense of being out of step with contemporary culture prompts Sims to consider converting to Catholicism under the guidance of Father Theodor (an industrious Danny Beason), Tinseltown's go-to consultant on all things Church of Rome. Meanwhile, Claire (a mannered Laura Giannarelli) grows close to producer John Grant (Lawrence Redmond, mostly unstrained), who is bracing for a

summons from the House Un-American Activities Committee. All of these figures have plot-fueling secrets in their pasts.

The most enjoyable presence is the arch, exasperated Basil played by R. Scott Williams. Basil is not a rounded or objectively plausible personage, but Williams's poise and confidence gives him life. All of the characters have a flair for knife-edged quips, but Basil is a veritable font of them. Insinuating that Sims's new religiosity relates to Father Theodor's attractiveness, Basil remarks witheringly, "When you told me a priest would be dropping by to help you, I pictured Spencer Tracy. When Montgomery Clift showed up, I assumed the meetings might go a bit longer than expected." (Basil often flounces peevishly on and off the detailed beachside-mansion set, by scenic designers Carl Gudenius, Jingwei Dai and Kirk Kristlibas.)

As that quote suggests, "All Save One" brims with references to classic Hollywood, a trait that could endear it to nostalgic audiences, were this production less stilted. Even a nod to the past needs to convince in the here and now.

FROM LEFT: Bill Largess as Sims Glendenning, Danny Beason as Father Theodor and R. Scott Williams as Basil Steele in "All Save One" by Greg Jones Ellis. (C. Stanley Photography)

All Save One by Greg Jones Ellis. Directed by Carl Randolph; costumes, Reema Al-Bawardy; lighting, Marianne Meadows; sound, Frank DiSalvo Jr. Two hours 15 minutes. Tickets: \$25-\$60. Through Dec. 9 at the Undercroft Theatre of Mount Vernon Place United Methodist Church, 900 Massachusetts Ave. NW. stageguild.org or 240-582-0050.

Laura Giannarelli as Claire Morgan in "All Save One." (C. Stanley Photography)

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