

Cactus flower production analysis movie review

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



The Off-Broadway production of Cactus Flower directed by Michael Bush at the Westside Theatre provides a lovely, bright look at the Sixties while still carrying the more whimsical themes of the farce. There are plenty of laughs to be had as misunderstandings and situations get out of control, and the characters scramble desperately to deal with each new circumstance that arises. In this paper, we will go over the play as a whole and how this particular production conveyed the messages present in the text.

The crux of the play revolves around Julian (Maxwell Caulfield), a philandering dentist, who pretends to have a wife in order to prevent himself from committing to the younger woman he is fooling around with, Toni (Jenni Barber). However, as Toni attempts suicide due to the thought of never fully being with him, Julian feels he needs to 'divorce' his 'wife' in order to make the relationship official, especially at Toni's insistence upon meeting her. As a result, he asks his cold, introverted assistant Stephanie (Lois Robbins) to pose as his wife in order to divorce her and keep up the sham. The problem arises when Toni, having met Stephanie and feeling sympathy for her, insists that Julian find a suitor for her as well, so that everyone can be happy. The hilarity ensues as the search begins for her new husband, and Julian attempts to hide the lie from Toni.

Bush's revival of the play Off-Broadway at the Westside Theatre provides a bright, glossy picture of the 1960s, with characters wearing vibrant, slim-cut suits and pillbox hats. There are multiple locations within the story, leading to frantic set changes between detailed, yet minimalist sets. The energy is always maintained at a high level, in order to keep the deceptions and the pitfalls very madcap and wacky. All of this provides a swinging feeling that <https://assignbuster.com/cactus-flower-production-analysis-movie-review/>

perfectly encapsulates a fantasy version of the 1960s, as seen by sex comedies of the era and *Mad Men*. Nothing is ever treated too darkly, and emotions and actions are broad - when Stephanie comes out of her shell, she changes nearly instantly into an oversexed, crazy woman, with little hint of subtlety or décor.

At the same time, that perfectly sums up the atmosphere of the play itself - Bush keeps the laughs coming and does not take things too seriously. That type of grittiness would be anathema to such a crazy sex farce as this, and so the humor and lightness are kept at a maximum. The production even makes light of suicide, especially in the beginning of the play, by treating it like a comedic bit, ramping up the physical comedy to eleven. Caulfield provided a nice, but far too suave and handsome, Julian - while he served the role well, he always seemed too smooth to be in this type of situation, as Julian is supposed to be a schlubby loser who has fallen into a crazy scenario way over his head. Barber plays the perfect needy girlfriend, always high-energy and full of spark, while Robbins does provide a nice progression from shy spinster to liberated sexual being, even if the portrayal of the latter is a bit over the top.

The play attempts to showcase the complications that ensue when one attempts to use marriage as a shield from embarking on a true relationship, and it is also about letting go and owning up to your feelings. Set in the swinging Sixties, playwright Abe Burrows creates a fun, wacky atmosphere in order to keep the laughs coming, but also has some cutting remarks about the sexual politics of that time period. It helped to demonstrate just how silly the entire exercise was - men attempting to juggle multiple women at the

same time, and men who weren't doing that pretending to do it anyway. The idea of marriage, to Julian, was so frightening that he invented a wife so that he could have a mistress on the side without needing to go through Step A.

The play also helped to highlight just how sexualized everything was in the Sixties - in the beginning, when Toni attempts to kill herself, she interprets mouth-to-mouth breathing on her neighbor's part as a French kiss. Also, Toni's wrench in the plan that states Stephanie must be hooked up with someone in order to make everyone "happy," makes clear just how obsessed everyone is with relationships. At the same time, as this is a sex farce, that would obviously be the primary theme of the entire piece.

Lies and misunderstandings line the entire plot of the play. Julian keeps the secret of being single from Toni, Stephanie keeps secret that she is in love with Julian, and so on. These secrets lead to a comedy of errors as all the characters struggle to maintain their facades and not let any inconsistencies brew. Also, of course, there is the reveal of all the lies at the near-end point of the play, which turns out surprisingly well for all involved. Toni ends up falling for one of the suitors that was slated for Stephanie, while Julian and Stephanie finally get together on their own.

The name of the play, 'Cactus Flower,' is meant to represent Stephanie, who has a cactus on her desk, portraying her as prickly and unable to have anyone close to her. Throughout the play she starts to warm up and become a more lively person, blooming just like a cactus flower. In essence, the play is Stephanie's story, as she presents the most growth, from a shy assistant to the object of Julian's affection, just as she always dreamed.

The playwright never treats these themes with any real degree of seriousness, and nor do the director and actors of this production - everything remains at a high level of farce, meant solely for entertainment purposes and not for dark examination of the desperation of mankind. At the same time, while the attempt by Bush et al. to keep that Sixties spirit, the script by Burrows does seem a bit anachronistic, even in comedic style - each laugh is telegraphed, and the smaller venue of the Westside Theatre does not help sell these broader moments, as it seems more fitted to a more intimate, subtle piece. Cactus Flower, on the other hand, is far from subtle.

In conclusion, Cactus Flower presents a wacky romp of misunderstandings and lots of doors opening and closing, as secrets and lies are kept and revealed all at once. At the same time, it is indicative of a lot of feelings in the Sixties, such as fear of commitment, fear of loneliness, and being able to bloom on your own and take a chance in life. The production at Westside never delves into these themes fully, instead focusing on the comedy of errors and sheer entertainment value. However, as that was the intention of the script from the start, and the revival seemed to want to be true to the period in which it was intended, the production cannot be faulted for that. The play would be ill-suited to a gritty reinterpretation, and as a result the whole play gets coated with a nice veneer of 1960s gloss and paraded out onto the stage for an hour and a half of good, honest fun.