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COLDWATER, MICHIGAN

'Will of George' bequeaths laughter, suspense

By DAVID GREEN *Staff Writer*

COLDWATER — Midway through the whodunit spoof *The Will of George*, Emily, the estranged wife of the corpse sprawled on the floor, declares to the group assembled in the library, "Mr. Rand (the constable) isn't going to leave until he knows all our dirty little secrets."

The haughtily condescending Emily — played with elaborate grandeur in a red silk evening gown and opera gloves by Debbie Jersey — is right.

The two-hour production, written by New York playwright Steven Packard, is a murder-mystery takeoff in which a body is discovered in the library of a 1920s English estate house.

In the course of the ensuing investigation by the bumbling constable Rand, many dirty secrets do come out. Motives are explored, suspicions shift and ultimately — as in all well-crafted whodunits — the lives of the

A review

characters become as engrossing as the plot.

Packard's play is the winner of this year's Robert J. Pickering Award for Playwriting Excellence. His script was chosen by the Coldwater Community Theater (CCT) from among 148 unperformed plays.

The Will of George's theme of murder notwithstanding, the CCT cast breathes life into Packard's characters.

George III, the 25-year-old son of the corpse, is played with petulant snobbery by Kurt Pifer. Chuck Lillis is the harried constable Rand — whose bungler's refrain of, "I hadn't thought of that" renders him an anti-Sherlock Holmes.

Livingston, Emily's bitter maid, is played wonderfully by Irene Grimes-Butdorf. And a sudden shift in Livingston's identity

is just one example of Packard's quirky plot twists that keep the audience hooked into the story.

As Livingston exits the library to fetch drinks — griping, as usual — Constable Rand remarks to Emily, "Charming woman. An old family retainer?"

"You could say that," Emily replies. "She's my mother."

Packard's droll wit keeps the audience chuckling.

A stipulation in the long-dead George I's will requiring his simpering grandson to have fathered a male child before inheriting the family fortune provokes an argument over the exact age of the spoiled young scion.

He claims he has already turned 25 — the age by which he was supposed to have sired a George IV. Emily, his mother, insists his birthday is not until the following week.

"Didn't you know your son had a birthday?" Rand quizzes Emily suspiciously.

"Of course I knew my son had a birthday," she replies with fawning condescension. "I was just a little confused as to when it was."

Packard's effective use of short scenes, punchy closing lines and rapid story development keep this two-act mystery unfolding at a brisk clip. In a cross between Agatha Christie and Tennessee Williams, allegations of homosexuality pepper the plot.

But a crucial detail Rand stumbles on at the end of the play causes the ultimate surprise for the audience — and turns the entire whodunit genre on its head.

Packard says he didn't plan to take such an original approach a traditional form.

"I just sit down and I write," he says. "I don't know what I've written until afterwards. . . . I think of a name; I listen to what that person tells me, and I write a line of dialogue. Then I keep going until the play is done."

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The griping maid Livingston (Irene Grimes-Butler) confronts her boss — and daughter — Emily (Debbie Jersey) in Steven Packard's *The Will of George*.