

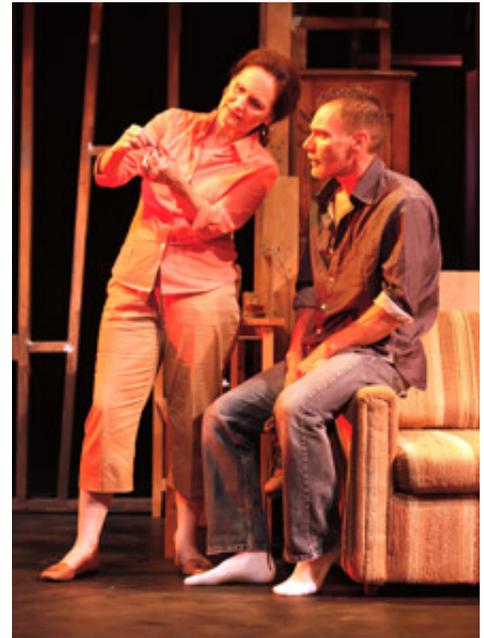
Tricks the Devil Taught Me

By [Andy Propst](#) • Aug 19, 2011 • [New York](#)

Playwright/director Tony Georges gives theatergoers the chance to witness the evolution of an unhappy marriage in the unsatisfyingly bleak and melodramatically overwritten *Tricks the Devil Taught Me*, now playing at the Minetta Lane Theatre.

Georges' nonlinear play, set in a small west Texas town, focuses not only on the domestic unhappiness of the couple, Betty and Don (Julie Jesneck and TJ Linnard play a younger incarnation of the couple while Beth Grant and Peter Bradbury play the two when they are older), but also the pious hypocrisy of the religious community that surrounds them.

Georges fractures the narrative, shifting the play back and forth through a 23-year-span, theoretically in an effort to heighten suspense. But his efforts don't succeed. It doesn't take long to realize what has gone wrong in the couple's relationship, changing Betty from a sweet optimistic soul (communicated gracefully by Jesneck) to a foulmouthed harridan. Impressively, Grant revels in Betty's scatological language and thoroughly unpleasant behavior.



Beth Grant and Peter Bradbury
in *Tricks the Devil Taught Me*
(Courtesy of the company)



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Further, Bradbury imbues Don with a welcome sense of menace. But, despite his untiring work, theatergoers strain to understand one key component of the play: Don's complicated scheme which he hopes will allow him to flee his backwater town and shrewish wife. Equally ponderous is the passive-aggressive involvement of the couple's unhappily married son Jeremy (also played by Linnard) in the plan.

Eventually, the details of Don's plans do crystallize, but they have less to do with his unhappiness than they do with Georges' dramatic ambitions: he uses the plot to propel the play to a violent confrontation between husband and wife. Rather than shocking or sending chills, this climax produces uncomfortable, and unexpected, laughs, in part because Georges has laced the work with a level of comedy and

tangential plotting that undercuts the work's dramatic center.

Humor can be found in an overextended sequence involving Betty and the women from her prayer group (including Renee, played zestfully by Mary Testa), where cattiness, holiness, and gossip go hand-in-hand. Laughs are also present in many of the scenes involving Betty and her best friend, Lorraine (an understated and amiable Jodie Lynne McClintock), an Avon-selling housewife, whose presence in the play -- and carefully concealed home life -- becomes crucial to several reversals late in this contemporary Southern Gothic tale.