



**BURN, BABY, BURN** Yvonne Woods (Anna) and David Arrow (Burton) star in SSC's production of "Burn This."

# The Show is Hot

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SSC does wonders with Lanford Wilson's riveting play | **BY LESLIE PATRICK**

**A** sign on the theater door warns that herbal cigarettes, adult content, and extreme language are about to transpire onstage—perhaps an unusual alert for the likes of a Shakespeare Santa Cruz performance. But, "Burn This," the gritty brainchild of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Lanford Wilson, contains ribbons of familiarity that coincide with, or possibly even rival, the temporal themes of any Shakespearean storyline.

A four-person cast—meager only in quantity, not quality—that dialogue brilliantly amongst themselves performs this compelling story, making the production sing with vulnerable honesty and witty emotion. The characters—quintessential New Yorkers—meld scintillating personalities and facetious one-liners that have the audience riveted. There's Anna, the newly troubled dancer turned choreographer who realizes that she has yet to discover her true self; Larry, whose inimitable wry humor and unabashed gay-ness provides the comic relief that keeps the rest of the story from becoming too depressing; Burton, Anna's bombastic screenwriter boyfriend who simply can't live up to her expectations; and then there's Pale, Robbie's gun-toting, fast-talking older brother who harbors a soft spot for Anna. At first centered around the accidental boating deaths of Robbie (Anna and Larry's friend and roommate) and Dominic (Robbie's boyfriend), "Burn This" develops into an unlikely love story.

The play opens with Anna, drowning her sorrows with vodka and reviving her smoking habit after Robbie's funeral. She and Larry recount to Burton the painfully uncomfortable time they spent with Robbie's family, who blatantly denied his homosexuality by preferring to assume that Anna was his distraught girlfriend. The sheer hypocrisy of the situation leaves Anna stricken with anger at the thought that anyone

could so deny the essence of a person they love—a recurring theme that percolates throughout the entire performance.

A month has passed when Pale, Robbie's ribald older brother, makes a powerful entrance as he arrives to pack up his brother's things. His foul mouth and hardscrabble sparring with Anna is fraught with emotionally charged suggestive undertones, ending in a night of passion; the turning point in which it seems Anna comes unglued. Pale leaves amidst a furious exhortation the next morning, leaving Anna unsure of what transpired the night before. Time passes for the quartet, and the play culminates on New Year's Eve with a fight between Pale and Burton that leaves a scar on Anna's heart. The situation forces her to face her reality and come to grips with her tangled emotions, which can be summed up when she says, "I have never had a personal life. I wasn't scared of it, I just had no place for it, it wasn't important. And all that is different now and I'm very vulnerable, I'm not going to be prey to something I don't want. I'm too easy." Played by Julliard-trained Yvonne Woods, Anna's inner struggle to come to grips with her reality is 100 percent convincing.

Each compelling vignette unfolds on the set of the same New York loft, charmingly constructed by set designer John Iacovelli. With authentic props such as refrigerator magnets, Wild Turkey whiskey, and a chaise longue, no detail is too small for attention; all the way down to the sunny porcelain yellow teapot that tough guy Pale uses to make orange-blossom tea.

Director, Michael Barakiva, has created a winning production replete with evocative dialogue, scintillating acting, and subject matter that resonates through the soul. "Burn This" is a flamboyant triumph of a play, making it a welcome addition to the Shakespeare Santa Cruz repertoire