



PHOTO BY CAROL ROSEGG

Annie Parisse and Gibson Frazier in the comical "The Internationalist" at the Vineyard Theatre

REVIEW

The trip's global, but the humor isn't foreign

THE INTERNATIONALIST. By Anne Washburn, directed by Ken Rus Schmoll. Through Nov. 26 at the Vineyard Theatre, 108 W. 15th St., Manhattan. Tickets \$55. Call 212-353-0303 or visit vineyardtheatre.org.

BY JOHN HABICH
STAFF WRITER

If "The Internationalist" paints an honest portrait of the United States abroad, then we haven't got a chance in the world — but we can laugh our way to global irrelevance.

In this crisp, insightful, ruefully funny joyride through international waters, which opened Tuesday at the Vineyard Theatre, playwright Anne Washburn imagines U.S. foreign relations through the misadventures of a presumptuous American on a transcontinental business trip.

Lowell (Zak Orth) arrives in a nameless country rumpled and frazzled after an unexplained five-hour delay he suspects, for no apparent reason, was terrorism-related. He sees a woman (Annie Parisse) holding a placard with his name on it, and assumes she is

his driver. Lowell has only one small carry-on bag, and not a clue.

At the office that is his destination, the people in charge greet him distractedly, as submerged in their own culture as he is in his. They all speak near-perfect English, but whenever we are about to get the gist of things, they lapse into their own language. After all, English is "a Frankenstein monster" patched together of far-flung linguistic scraps, "a continual slow process of cultural indigestion."

Washburn's use of a made-up foreign idiom ("bied dixatot pilia nam oritan aba deed formla ipatoriat") puts the entire audience at the same disadvantage as Lowell. We are all outsiders. None of us can figure out what is going on, but it keeps going on regardless of what our countryman says or does. The script underscores the theme of self-absorbed alienation with impenetrable business jargon, and snubs based on gender and rank.

Of course, Lowell is so earnestly befuddled that his woes are often hilarious: As with "Who's on first?" or Lucy and Ricky Ricardo, the action gets zanier the harder people try to commu-

nicate. When Lowell downs the native firewater, Orth's contortions and grimaces churn out a side-splitting pantomime.

The cast is uniformly sharp and subtle, with an especially dry bit by Nina Hellman as a sardonic prostitute decked out in trenchcoat, bustier and beret (costumes by Michelle R. Phillips). Parisse is captivating as the office assistant who becomes Lowell's guide.

The romance between a displaced schlub and a startlingly beautiful woman in a strange land recalls "Lost in Translation," except that we can't see quite what makes this affair spark. It lacks the high-stakes wallop to pull the action to a satisfying climax.

The tempo never lulls, though, on this set (designed by Andromache Chalfant) that looks as familiar as a depersonalized workplace one minute and as spooky as a crypt the next (thanks in part to Jeff Croiter's cinematic lighting).

Director Ken Rus Schmoll could have done more shading with nonverbal language, which tends to differ in surprising ways from one culture to another. But he does a bang-up job with whatever everybody else is speaking.