

FROM THE TOP

Oliver Hailey's new comedy, *Round Trip*, has its world premiere on the Balch Playhouse stage this summer. The title refers not so much to the plot as to the experience of the audience: it is we who are taken on a circular journey, back to our point of departure. In the intervening hours we visit that twilight zone where art and life touch: the rehearsal stage.

Like *Who's Happy Now?*, this summer's first Hailey offering, *Round Trip* uses the ancient and honorable device of the play-within-a-play to explore the delicate, elusive relationship between reality and what is made of it by the playwright — in this case, a man who threw himself into the East River in despair over the result. The device is usually drenched in irony, since "the play" within the play we watch has the effect of conning us even more completely than usual into believing in the reality of the play we watch. Consequently, the audience plays a leading role in *Round Trip*, as our sense of reality is very much at stake here.

As the counterpoint develops between the characters David, Peggy, and Johnny, and the nameless "real people" who play them, we are struck by parallels, by the way in which, as Oscar Wilde so wisely noted, life does imitate art, as well as vice-versa. The sexual tensions within the play, the homophobic nervousness, even the grief for a dead child are echoed in the actors' "real" lives. But mostly the comedy of *Round Trip* derives from the awkward dissonance of life intruding on art. "The play," as we are often reminded, is not a comedy — but *Round Trip* is. No matter how painful the confrontations in "the play," the abrasions of life are bloodier, messier; and art, ever the beautiful liar, makes everything relatively calm, harmonious, and whole. "The play," in fact, is the eye of a hurricane, its centrifugal pull pitted against the centripetal forces raging around it: the struggles between actor and actress, actors and director, actor and playwright, ego and ego, husband and wife, past and present, actor and audience. "We're all looking for something in our work that we can't pull off in our lives," says one of the cast, and in odd ways they find that fulfillment in their roles.

What *Round Trip* gives us is the plot behind the play, the infinitely more complicated off-stage drama that weaves and twists its way through rehearsal after rehearsal, from Detroit to Buffalo to Cleveland, through the "repeat and repeat and repeat" that is the actor's life. We, the audience, as we're told at the end, are lucky; we see it once and leave with the illusion of truth . . . though perhaps on the way home we wonder who might be writing and revising our final scene, whether this or that line might better be changed, whether to show so much emotion before the exit, whether we ought to go for the laugh. Or maybe we recall when Tom, the director, says the actress is "a helluva lot better at acting than she is at living," one of the actors responds, "Who isn't?"

Gail Griffin
Festival Dramaturge