



# ***On the Money* and Other Plays About Vintage Ideas**

**STEVEN LEIGH MORRIS** | FEBRUARY 13, 2014 | 4:00AM

Let's start with the important stuff: audience members taking selfies during a performance in an intimate theater.

Craig Anton's wry staging of Solange Castro's delightfully nimble piffle of a play, *Changes in the Mating Strategies of White People*, opens in a brick-walled java house (set by Amanda Knehans) that's so bemusingly authentic and familiar, you know we're in for some kind of satire. When the first four actors (Abigail Marlowe, William Nicol, Gloria Charles and Kim Estes) of this solid ensemble take the stage, each of their faces is lit by the glow of either a cellphone or a laptop screen.

Hollywood's Lounge Theatre, where the play runs through Feb. 23, holds only about 40 to 50 people, but that didn't stop a woman in the front row from illuminating her own face with her own cellphone, and texting, throughout the show's first 20 minutes. When she wasn't texting, her phone just lay in her purse sending up its ethereal glow, matching the glow of the devices held by the actors – the difference being that they, at least, were engaged in a parody. That same woman also unwrapped a hard candy during a particularly witty scene – as though the preshow request about these kinds of behaviors had been delivered in Aramaic.

Solange's perky satire of device-era dating is largely about the plight of the self-absorbed, but that was all lost on this patron – as it was on another woman sitting next to me who took flash selfies throughout the performance. There are times I really miss the 20th century.

**If you also miss** the 20th century, and how it paved the way for today, you might want to check out Kos Kostmayer's *On the Money* at Burbank's Victory Theatre. This same company staged this same play 30 years ago. Its presentation now is part of the Victory's 35th-anniversary season.

The heist-gone-wrong story, set in the bar of a 1980s New York City eatery, winks at David Mamet's *American Buffalo*, but Kostmayer's heart is closer to that of Clifford Odets. Whereas Mamet delights in how mentally unhinged his financially struggling thugs are, Kostmayer is more focused on America's class divide and how it stifles opportunities for the waitstaff (David Fraioli and Maria Tomas) and barkeep (Jonathan Kells Phillips). It's a free market, but the employees feel not so free when minimum wage doesn't pay bills and the owner (Vincent Guastaferro) arbitrarily shorts paychecks. The plot chronicles an employee insurrection at the moment when the boss is having a Scrooge-like change of heart. Tom Ormeny's robust ensemble and taut staging allow the story to sparkle all the way to its melodramatic finale.

**Another vintage curio** from the 20th century, Bernard Pomerance's *The Elephant Man*, was performed under the vaulted ceilings and along the Romanesque archways of St. John's Episcopal Cathedral, a decision by director Patricia McKee to underscore the play's theological underpinnings. (It has since closed.)

For the uninitiated, the story concerns one John Merrick (Mark McClain Wilson) of London in the mid- to late 1880s, whose physical deformities were so grotesque that they caused people to faint on sight. Merrick was exploited in freak shows and finally, in his dying days, rescued by a compassionate if imperious physician (William Kidd), who raised money to secure Merrick's safe domicile in London Hospital, Whitechapel.

The deformities in this production were merely suggested by the actor with a twist of the face. Often, productions show slide projections of the malady, in order to help the audience understand what the shock is all about, but not here.

Pomerance's point is that everybody uses Merrick's deformities as a kind of mirror onto their own soul, so that the ability to merely be civil becomes a test of Christian character. This is a latter-day biblical story about the sacrifice of the outcast, played out beneath any number of sacred sculptures.

The Cathedral's cavernous space worked beautifully for the liturgical music punctuating McKee's production. It presented more of a challenge for the spoken words, which floated into the upper sanctum. And yet, the space transformed the event into a kind of passion play of holy introspection.

**Skylight Theatre Company** is premiering Ross Golan's song-cycle ballad *The Wrong Man*, which he performs on acoustic guitar, accompanied at times by a dancer (Jennifer Brasuell), representing the stripper he meets in Reno, and who unwittingly becomes the cause of his wrongful death-penalty sentence. This isn't a spoiler because the opening number, "The Wrong Man," lets us know he's in deep trouble. Golan croons the subsequent songs in a beautiful, lugubrious blend of rap, the blues and the poetical and treble vocal stylings of Loudon Wainwright.

The music, and Golan's performance of it, is so good that one wishes Adam Flemming's exacting projection design, which plays behind the songs, weren't so literal, and that the ballad had at least one story turn. These quibbles don't render Lee Martino's staging anything less than hypnotic.

**CHANGES IN THE MATING STRATEGIES OF WHITE PEOPLE** | By Solange Castro | Lounge Theatre 2, 6201 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd. | Through Feb. 23 | (323) 960-7787 | [plays411.net/changes](http://plays411.net/changes)

**ON THE MONEY** | By Kos Kostmayer | Victory Theatre Center, 3326 W. Victory Blvd., Burbank | Through March 2 | (818) 841-5422 | [thevictorytheatrecenter.org](http://thevictorytheatrecenter.org)

**THE ELEPHANT MAN** | By Bernard Pomerance | St. John's Episcopal Cathedral, 514 W. Adams Blvd., dwntwn. | closed

**THE WRONG MAN** | Written and performed by Ross Golan | Skylight Theatre Company, 1816 ½ N. Vermont Ave., Los Feliz | Through March 16 | (213) 761-7061 | [skylighttix.com](http://skylighttix.com)



Ross Golan in *The Wrong Man*

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