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Buicks

With the plethora of slick Asian and European automobiles that flood America's showrooms, one wonders what future role Buick will find for itself in the marketplace. In Paragon Theatre Company's regional premiere of *Buicks*, dealership owner Bill Abeline ends up asking much the same question of himself.

Like his father before him, Bill wants nothing more than to convince his customers that their lives will be enhanced when they find themselves behind the wheel of a new Buick, and, using an impressive array of psychological tricks, he does this with convincing regularity. The trouble is there is little else to Bill's life.

Sitting at the opposite end of a dining room table stretched lengthwise across the stage to the limits of credulity, Bill's wife, Kathy, tries to bridge the gap between his world of chrome, comfort, and sales charts with that of their home, their kids, and their relationship. But Bill is seemingly incapable of grasping these simple joys.

Finding a reasoned, smooth surface from which to operate, David Harms crafts a Bill that is consummately professional at work. At home and with friends though, Harms lets us see that below Bill's façade there is a hollowness which, once penetrated, offers no resistance to his resident dissatisfaction and anger.

Providing a patient, earnest, and persuasive counterpoint to Bill's ennui, Barbra Andrews' Kathy exhausts all avenues of inquiry with her husband. Andrews is especially compelling when Kathy is trying to rekindle Bill's memories of their courtship. All this is to no avail, so she has our sympathies when, failing to make a connection, she takes drastic action.

Adrift in his own lies, Bill latches onto Naranja, an attractive Mexican employee with a tireless work ethic, whose illegal status puts her at his mercy. Projecting a strong sense of dignity, Leah Keith's Naranja challenges parts of Bill that he had forgotten about, making his transformation possible.

After a manic road trip on which he has coaxed Naranja under false pretenses, Bill returns to Fresno with a different perspective. He is now capable of having a heart-to-heart with his dad, even inviting him to take a



David Harms as Bill and
Leah Keith as Naranja
Photo: Paragon Theatre

respite from the nursing home and stay at the house. Like the Buick Rendezvous mid-size SUV that he touts in their shop talk, Bill seems to have found a new market niche for his life. "Not a bad view," he says convincingly.

Director Wendy Franz keeps the action moving throughout, navigating playwright Sheppard's multitudinous scene changes with simple, yet effective props. Jarrad Holbrook conjures a steady stream of offbeat characters, including an amusingly nerdy customer and an abrasive barfly. Ken Witt does a nice turn as Bill's grumpy, hard-to-please father.

Though the change we witness in Bill is not earth-shattering, his realizations nevertheless provide him with a life-altering perspective, one that is fully capable of breaking him out of his comfortable, sedan-like existence and connecting with the wider world. Like his beloved Buicks, Bill seems to have found a means of reformulating himself.

Paragon Theatre Company's production of *Buicks* runs through March 5th. 303-300-2210.

Bob Bows

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