

'The Dresser' review: 2 star turns carry play

[Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic](#)

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Kevin Berne

Ken Ruta (seated) and James Carpenter star in San Jose Rep's production of "The Dresser."

The Dresser: Drama. By [Ronald Harwood](#). Directed by Rick Lombardo. Through Feb. 20. [San Jose Repertory Theatre](#), 101 Paseo de San Antonio. Two hours, 40 minutes. \$35-\$74. (408) 367-7255. www.sjrep.com.

There's nothing glamorous about the life in the theater depicted in Ronald Harwood's "[The Dresser](#)," but there's considerable glory in the performances of James Carpenter and Ken Ruta in the San Jose Repertory production that opened Wednesday.

Fortunately, Ruta and Carpenter take up the lion's share of stage time in Harwood's overlong love letter to the theater. The play itself is a fairly poignant and historically interesting memoir of the actor-manager troupes that dominated the stage for more than a century. And it's a sometimes pretentious paean to the old troupers who carried on through the [World War II](#) blitz of England.

Based on his almost 10 years serving as dresser to [Donald Wolfit](#), the last of England's notable actor-managers, Harwood's 1980 West End and Broadway hit is the kind of instant old chestnut that survives on the lead roles it provides for two strong actors. That's the case here, as it was at [Shakespeare Santa Cruz](#) in '95 with Paul Whitworth and [Tony Church](#) (and in the '83 film starring [Albert Finney](#) and Tom Courtenay).

Ruta is Sir, an older and less talented actor than Wolfit, who is touring the provinces (as Wolfit did) as the Nazi bombs fall. Ailing, his mind wandering and memory failing, he's preparing for his 227th "[King Lear](#)" with a ragtag company of wartime rejects.

Carpenter is Norman, the title role, focused on propping up this empty shell of an actor for yet another show. Stagestruck, middle-aged and gay, Norman has come to define himself by his intimacy with the once-commanding actor. Inflating the man's talents as much for his own benefit as Sir's, he jealously guards his primacy against Sir's wife (Rachel Harker), a longtime smitten stage manager (a no-nonsense Lynne Soffer) and a young actress (a sex-kittenish Blythe Foster) bent on sleeping her way into a good role.

Carpenter splendidly delineates those aspects of Norman as they war with long-simmering resentments and the sheer urgency of getting a disintegrating Sir ready to go on. Ruta paints so convincing a portrait of a mind disintegrating in extremis, with periodic peremptory flashes of his customary petty tyranny, that his sudden assumptions of Shakespearean grandeur seem astonishing justifications of the lives of the others.

Rick Lombardo has assembled a strong supporting cast (including Julian López-Morillas and Blake Ellis) and gives the play a fairly grand staging with fine costumes by Cathleen Edwards and wartime sound effects by Steve Schoenbeck.

Harwood's script doesn't justify the effort. The supporting roles remain underdeveloped and Kent Dorsey's finely detailed backstage sets probably aren't worth the time it takes to change scenes. The primary value of "Dresser" is in its two principal roles, and Carpenter and Ruta deliver the goods.

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