

THEATER REVIEW

The terror comes in the *Dark*

■ If the bad guys don't get you, the wait might

By **EVERETT EVANS**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

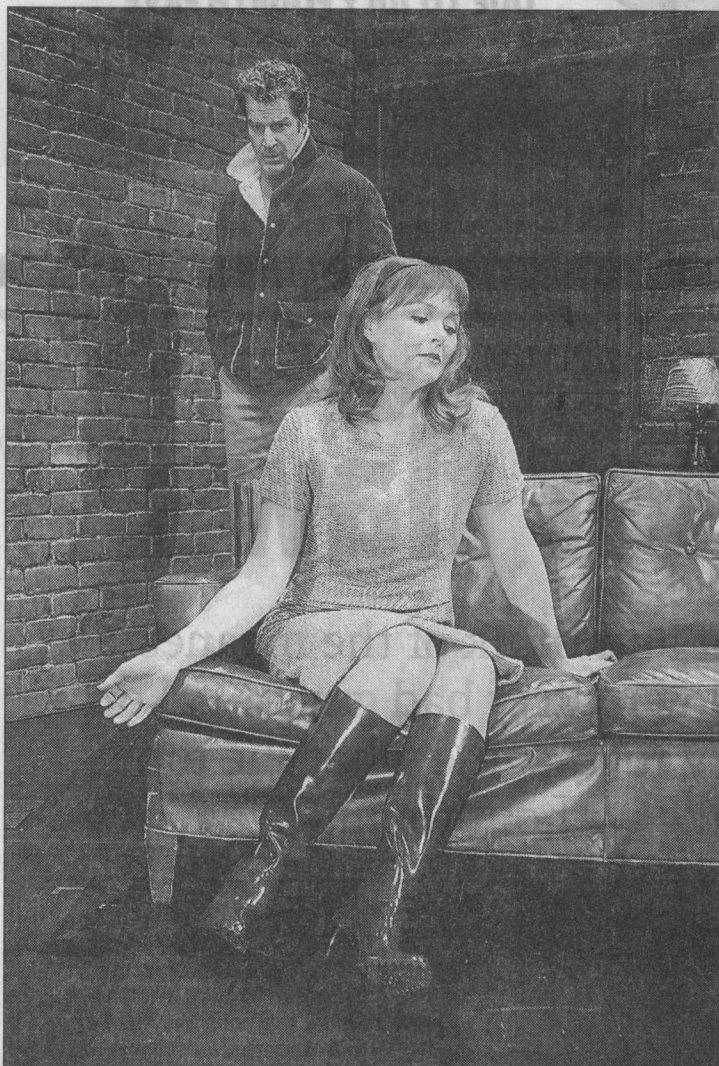
"Wait" is the operative word with Frederick Knott's *Wait Until Dark*. For a famous suspense play, it takes its sweet time getting around to the suspense.

Even in the Alley Theater's well-acted rendition — with a sympathetic performance by Alley mainstay Elizabeth Heflin and reasonably atmospheric direction by Broadway veteran Scott Schwartz — it's well into the second half before anything like a thrill rears its head.

The play's reputation rests on its simple but sturdy premise: brave blind heroine Susy Hendrix fends off three crooks who invade her home seeking a drug-stuffed doll that has found its way into her possession. In the still potent climax, Susy squares off with the nastiest of the villains in total darkness, having blacked out her apartment to level the playing field.

To get there, however, one must first endure a talky, convoluted, overextended setup in which several points defy credibility. Strangers repeatedly gain admittance to the protagonist's home with phenomenal ease. Her husband comes across as rather dim for having agreed to transport the doll for a stranger he met in an airport — and dimmer still for then having lost track of it and being easily lured away by the wild goose chase concocted by the villains.

The ruses, back stories and



MEENU BHARDWAJ: FOR THE CHRONICLE
MENACE IN THE HOUSE: Kevin Kilner plays reluctant bad guy Mike Talman, and Elizabeth Heflin is the blind Susy Hendrix in the Alley Theatre's production of *Wait Until Dark*.

false identities employed by the crooks are meant to explain why Susy doesn't just give them the doll or call the police. The bad-dies have her convinced she might be implicating her absent

husband in a crime. But all that means we're past the halfway mark before we reach the cards-on-the-table confrontation and any sense of real jeopardy for the heroine.

WAIT UNTIL DARK

■ **When:** 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays, 8 p.m. Fridays, 2:30 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. Sundays, through July 16

■ **Where:** Hubbard Stage, Alley Theatre, 615 Texas

■ **Tickets:** \$19-\$22; 713-228-8421

Heflin helps justify the production by giving us a Susy who is everything the role ought to be: plucky, resilient, wryly humorous and remarkably resourceful. In that final standoff, she's fiercely determined — and what convincing screams!

John Tyson revels in the villainess of Harry Roat, ringleader of the crooks, a sadistic psychopath — even if he may tip the scale a bit more toward the comic than the menacing. Kevin Kilner is excellent as Mike, the down-at-the-heels-but-decent-at-heart ex-con forced into the caper, creating a rough-edged character with a lived-in look. Jeffrey Bean is droll as the doggedly dense Carlino, the crook pretending to be a police sergeant (naturally).

Maureen Fenninger enlivens the proceedings as Gloria, Susy's upstairs neighbor. She's natural, amusing and spirited as the occasionally bratty kid who becomes Susy's assistant and ally in the crisis and is delighted to find herself in an adventure.

Director Schwartz may not entirely solve the problem of the static first half, but he does manage to drop a few hints of the suspense to come. Once things pick up in Act II, he keeps the pace building to the end. And he does exploit the theatricality of that finale with Heflin and Tyson battling mostly in darkness, illuminated briefly by hastily struck matches and such. As noted, that final showdown is still potent.

If you're willing to wait for it.