

MISSISSIPPI NEWS

# illuminating psychological thriller 'Gaslight' opens at New Stage Theatre

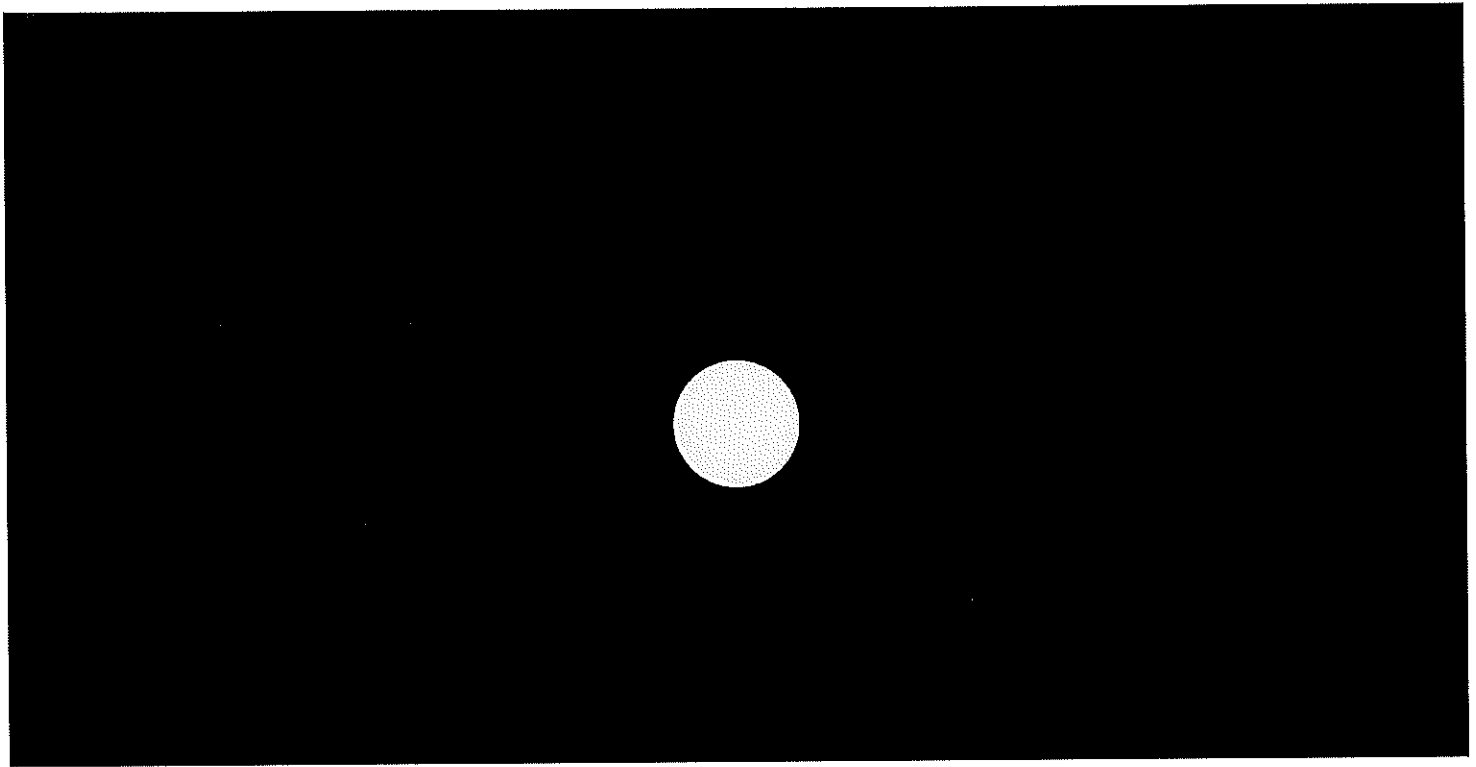
by Sherry Lucas  
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Jackson, Miss. — “Gaslight” casts an eerie glow of suspense at New Stage Theatre, where a Victorian h Privacy - Ter

of flickering lamps and shifting shadows feeds a haunting sense of unease that feels like a button-glove fit for Halloween.

Its timely tuck in the midst of an election season seems fitting, too, as the psychological manipulation at the story's heart — a husband's willful intent to unsettle his wealthy wife's sense of reality and drive her mad — resonates in an age of misinformation, deepfakes, foreign influence attempts and oft-repeated lies that can spread like wildfire across social media.



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“Gaslight” by Steven Dietz, based on the original 1938 play by Patrick Hamilton, has its regional premiere at New Stage Theatre, with an Oct. 22 opening and performances through Nov. 3.

The acclaimed original spawned a host of incarnations, including the hit American play “Angel Street” and classic British and American films (both named “Gaslight”) in the 1940s. The acclaimed American version snagged two Oscars, for Best Actress Ingrid Bergman and Best Production Design, and was nominated for five others, including Best Picture.

“Gaslighting” first emerged as a verb in the mid-20th century, describing deception similar to that in the drama, but reached its zenith in current times as a broader shorthand for misleading someone for personal gain and in 2022 became Merriam-Webster’s Word of the Year.

The thriller's newer, concise version moves the drama from London to 1880s-era New York, and gives the women in the story, the wife and two maids, more agency, as well other updates in a suspenseful story that unfolds over a single night in the stifling confines of a gloomy Victorian house on the East Side. Underscoring enhances a film noir-like atmosphere.

"It's not the typical melodrama, where the white knight comes in and saves the damsel in distress," said Drew Stark, who plays Jack Manningham, the husband whose charm may hide an undercurrent of greed and secret, sinister intent. "Villains are always fun, but the idea is not to play 'I'm an evil villain' with a twirling mustache of the melodrama era. But, to try to really focus on what I want, even though it's different from what other people want and perhaps what society wants," he said of his character's goal to unravel his wife's sanity and land her in a mental institution.



In "Gaslight" at New Stage Theatre, Hannah Elizabeth Freeman plays Bella Manningham, whose isolated home life in 1880s New York becomes increasingly disorienting as her husband ramps up the deception in an effort to drive her mad. Credit: Photo by Joey Nelms/ courtesy of New Stage Theatre.

Hannah Elizabeth Freeman of Brandon, a recent transplant from Kansas City, Missouri makes her New Stage debut as Bella Manningham, a relative newlywed only a few years into her marriage with Jack and still very much in love. “She tries so hard to make him happy. She wants to be happy, desperately. She is orphaned at this point in her life. Her dad has passed away, and her mother was sent away. So, she’s fairly isolated and Jack is her lifeline and connection to the outside world.”

Her guiding line is Bella’s statement, “I live forever now in a world of doubt, not knowing what’s real and what I have invented.” Throughout, she is desperately trying to figure out what is real and who to trust. “It’s a psychological thriller, so it’s perfect for Halloween. ... I think people will really feel like it’s the perfect time of year to go on this ride with Bella.” Even if audiences know the story on the front end, cast and crew hope they will revel in the fun as clues pop up and the mystery unfolds.

Ward Emling has the role of Sgt. Rough, a retired British detective who had worked with the New York City police early in his career and just cannot let go of an unsolved murder from his early days as a young officer on the New York police force. “I come into their tenuous world, and stir it up a bit,” he said of Sgt. Rough, who shows up at the house on this fateful evening, with a quest to prove his theory about the crime. He also soon sees the need to lift up Bella, give her strength, gain her trust and even win her over to help. He also manages to inject a bit of levity into this dark, tension-filled situation. Malaika Quarterman as the loyal senior maid, Marquita Levy as the sassy, younger maid, and Keith Allen Davis Jr. and Jacob Heuer as police officers, complete the cast.

“It’s interesting that the term ‘gaslighting’ was not a term until after Patrick Hamilton’s play — that it gave rise to the psychological term,” said New Stage Theatre Artistic Director Francine Thomas Reynolds, who also directs this production. New adaptations of the story that draw out the women characters find more relevance in contemporary times. “How do you deal with manipulation? How do you come through it? ... I think people will recognize the tactics of belittling someone and invalidating someone.”

“These conditions, these situations certainly exist today — someone wanting money, and using charm to get money,” Reynolds said. Bullying and the use of drugs and emotional control to target vulnerabilities and render people, often women, more pliable also resonate in today’s headlines.





The literal reference in the play's "Gaslight" title comes from the lamps that illuminated the Victorian era. Their bright glow dims when lights are turned on elsewhere in the house, an indication some activity is afoot in another room. For Bella in the story, it provides a clue that her husband may be keeping secrets. Credit: Photo by Sherry Lucas

In a broader, societal context, the illusion vs. reality question finds parallels, too. "In looking at the play, I saw a lot of relation to misinformation," Reynolds said. "We hear things and are told things and we're told we need to believe them. What's real news? What's fake news?"

"In an age when we have so many choices for information, what's real and what's not is really hard to decipher."

*Performances of "Gaslight" are at 7 p.m. Oct. 23-26, 29, 31 and Nov. 1-2, 2 p.m. Oct. 27 and Nov. 3, and 1 p.m. Oct. 30 at New Stage Theatre, 1100 Carlisle St., Jackson, Miss. Tickets are \$35 each with discounts for seniors, students and military. Call 601-948-3533 ext. 223 or visit [www.newstagetheatre.com](http://www.newstagetheatre.com) for tickets or more information on the production.*