

## Idle Brings Christmas in July to Newport



Photo credit: Shea'la Finch

While many of Rhode Island's theater companies enjoy (or suffer from, depending on their point of view) a freedom from having to perform in a particular venue, Strange Attractor Theatre Company isn't pinned down to a particular city or even a particular state. They have roots in Rhode Island, Pennsylvania and Alaska, so it's no wonder if you're struggling to recall their name. However, since 2010, Strange Attractor has been offering up innovative, challenging and unique pieces that often defy traditional expectations of the theatrical experience. Much like the oft-missed Theater of Thought's site-specific productions, Strange Attractor often brings the audience inside the piece and walks a perfectly fine line between actively engaging spectators and traditional storytelling. 2011's *If You Shoot A Boot You Might Get Wet* was beautifully baffling, exploring the lives of a couple who live in a house made of suitcases. One of their first productions, *Special Happy*, was "an absurdist birthday party thrown for the audience." Their latest local offering, *Idle*, follows in similar tradition as we are invited into a private home in Newport for an annual Christmas pageant hosted by a pair of uncomfortably close, possibly inbred, and ultimately laugh-out-loud adorable twins who quarrel, sing, dance, tell stories and unwittingly allow us into their *Flowers in the Attic*-esque lives.

*Idle* has been in development for over a year, with initial workshop performances taking place at the Mathewson Street Black Box Theater, but now the show is fully formed and actually happening in a living room in a private residence in Newport. At first, the idea sounds iffy, not unlike private house concerts, but the conceit, in this case, is perfectly executed, with a small audience gathered outside on the lawn, preshow, not knowing what to expect. Eventually, we are invited inside to a cozy, purposefully stuffy, old-fashioned kitchen by a deliciously sulky maid (played by stage manager Nicky Mariani) who dishes out cookies and hot cider, and *Idle* is surreptitiously underway. While wonderfully tacky Christmas jingles waft through the air, we peruse the guest book and realize that we are now part of a continuum of annual themed Christmas gatherings, some of which appear to have involved some undefined nastiness. The book reads like a schoolgirl's scrapbook and it's clear that the pageant is considered a big deal by ... someone. Tina, the maid, makes mention of "the twins" almost being ready, and soon they burst into the cramped kitchen for a quick and peculiar hello before we are ushered into the living room.

Jed Hancock-Brainerd and Casey Seymour Kim, both recently featured to great effect in The Gamm's *Marie Antoinette*, have created a duo on par with the best of Monty Python (see the "Upperclass Twit of the Year" sketch for a reference). Their interplay is beguiling, over-the-top and amusingly offensive as

these old money siblings with their Little Lord Fauntleroy hairdos make the maid “speak like they do in Johnston” and bemoan the lack of burnt cork, preventing a blackface presentation. As mentioned, the pageant actually takes place in the living room of this stately Newport house, but has been transformed (by the twins) into a home theater, complete with curtains, footlights and sound cues. We are invited to sing along and given sheet music in order to do so. Now, all of this might wear thin quickly, no matter how addictive the performances, but an undercurrent of sadness and tragedy is deftly woven into the proceedings. We get hints that the old money may be running out (“I think it’s Obama”), but more unsettling is the mention of an unseen sister whose existence is teased throughout the guestbook, if you’ve looked carefully enough. We’re warned of supernatural occurrences being a possibility, hidden stashes of liquor are retrieved by Tina and a general sadness pervades the jocularly even if the show must go on at all cost. And it does so, wondrously.

Idle is essentially sold out for the remainder of the run, but it would be a disservice to those who have reservations and those who may be able to snag a seat by cancellation to reveal more of the action. Suffice it to say that what seems like a loose, almost improvisational romp is carefully crafted (Rebecca Noon directs) and Clara Weishahn (recently seen at both The Gamm and Wilbury Group) has a large and beautifully eerie part in all of this. While the twins give us the most sublimely uncomfortable dance moves since *Little Miss Sunshine*, Weishahn’s performance is ethereal, hilarious and intensely creepy all at once.

Idle is a gem and audience members feel as if they’ve been let in on a precious secret that few will ever share. It is hard to imagine this production taking place in a black box theater or larger venue, simply by its very nature, so we can only hope that Strange Attractor resurrects the performances again in the same place or the show will simply have to fade into “you had to be there” infamy. Keep your eye on their website and sign up for the email list, for Strange Attractor deserves notice among this crowded Rhode Island theater scene, especially five years in. You have been notified.

*Strange Attractor presents Idle in Newport July 18 and 19 at 2pm and July 18 at 6pm (with some availability remaining). Email [info@strangeattractor.org](mailto:info@strangeattractor.org) for reservations and location. For more information, visit [strangeattractor.org](http://strangeattractor.org).*