



James Heyward and Julie Becker in "Bug."

## 'Bug' is hard to shake

By Jules Becker

Did neo-Nazi scientists conduct experiments on the brains of Gulf War veterans? Or is veteran Peter Evans losing his mind?

Those questions animate Tracy Letts's 1996 dramatic thriller "Bug," now in a taut revival staged by Flat Earth Theatre at the Factory Theatre in Boston.

While the plot may sound a bit farfetched, the US government did use soldiers as human guinea pigs in experiments conducted at the Edgewood Arsenal in Maryland from the 1950s to '70s. Known as Program 112, the project included research into mind control and hallucinogens. Among the scientists were former Nazis.

Letts, who wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning "August: Osage County," leaves the viewer guessing whether Peter's accounts of bizarre experiments are real or imagined. The play's title captures the ambiguity: Has a mind-controlling aphid been implanted in Peter's body or is he bugged by a psychological condition?

Agnes, a young divorced waitress, falls for Peter and invites him home for a night. Their dalliance deepens into a real relationship that sends Agnes on an emotional odyssey that is likely to linger in audience members' minds long after the play's 90-minute roller-coaster ride.

Set entirely in a seedy Oklahoma motel room, "Bug" finds the love-starved Agnes gradually buying into Peter's claims about Army and CIA mind-control research. As she does, the sound effects build from crickets chirping to insects buzzing to a helicopter hovering (credit to designer Tyson Ratering).

Peter claims to discover a bug infestation in Agnes' room. As he tries to eradicate it, the relatively spare set becomes crowded with enough insecticide and other bug removal products to equip a Terminix

### Stage Review

*"Bug" performed by Flat Earth Theatre at the Factory Theatre, Boston, through Aug. 6. 800-838-3006 or [flatearththeatre.com](http://flatearththeatre.com)*

team (kudos to designer Nate Kruback). Eventually, Agnes becomes as fanatical about exterminating the bugs as Peter is. Is the infestation another one of Peter's delusions?

One skeptic is R.C., a lesbian friend of Agnes. R.C. (played by an appropriately feisty Emily Hecht) grows concerned as she sees Agnes drawn into Peter's world.

Meanwhile, the waitress' ex-con former husband Jerry Goss (menacingly portrayed by Stephen James Demarco) ignores a restraining order to push his way back into her life and questions Peter's sanity. As Agnes resists her abusive ex, Peter bolsters her courage.

Rounding out the cast is a Dr. Sweet (nicely understated by Tim Fairley), who complicates the plot even further. Describing Peter as a "delusional paranoid with schizophrenic tendencies," the doctor reveals that the veteran had spent four years in an army hospital. The doctor tries to enlist Agnes' help by suggesting that he could help find her missing son (who, in the play's back story, had disappeared while his mom was shopping). Is this just a ploy to snare her into some sort of cover-up conspiracy?

Jake Scaltreto sharply directs Letts' absorbing thriller. Julie Becker (no relation) is heart-wrenching as Agnes – first as the lonely young woman and later as Peter's fervent, loving ally. James Heyward as Peter catches both his appealing sincerity with Agnes and growing hostility with everyone else.

Part cautionary drama, part tongue-in-cheek spoof, "Bug" is undeniably infested with theatrical fun.