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THEATER By Cathy Seidner

Spellbinding 'Coyote'

The Coyote Bleeds

BY: Tony DiMurro.

DIRECTOR: Jeff Cohen.

CAST: Peter Appel, Chauncey de Leon Gilbert, Anthony Mangano, Stewart Steinberg and Joyce Ann Lee.

WHERE: The Worth Street Theatre, 173 West Broadway. Telephone: (212) 226-1043. Scheduled to close Dec. 17, but run is likely to be extended.

A STONE'S THROW from Police Plaza and the criminal courts, the Worth Street Theatre is currently featuring a gritty, spellbinding gem of a production about police and the criminal justice system, *The Coyote Bleeds*.

The action is set in a police precinct called "Dodge City" by the press. The officers' world view is reflected in the station's bulletin board, which bears ads for breast implants and live phone sex alongside a placard admonishing against sexual harassment.

The show revolves around Detective Hunt Moore, who is trying to solve a tough case with a brand-new partner, a tyro detective with a college degree and a police decoration for good attendance but no concept of the realities of police work. Hunt, a third-generation cop with 31 years on the force, has a simple approach to his job: Trust is the cornerstone of a solid foundation — have total trust in your partner and unshakeable trust in your own instincts. This approach results in the usage of unorthodox methods which although difficult for Hunt to convey to his partners help him solve an amazing number of cases.

The case at hand, which Hunt has dubbed the "Beaver Cleaver," is the brutal rape and murder of a young white girl who Hunt describes as "coyote ugly," a term he defines as "when you wake up in bed with a woman under your arm who is so ugly you'd rather chew off your arm than wake her up." A review of police files has convinced Hunt that the perpetrator is a black career criminal with a long history of car thefts and outstanding parking violations who lives in the same complex as the victim and was reportedly attracted to her. Despite the protests of the assistant district attorney assigned to review the files, a young black woman with an attitude who is unencumbered by her title in her zealous defense of Hunt's black suspects, Hunt has managed to get his presumed perpetrator's picture on a TV "most wanted" show, which yields the desired outcome: The suspect comes to the station on his own accord.

Hunt goes to work at what he does best — solving crimes by getting confessions. In this particular case, however, when things go according to plan, the unexpected happens, and after several plot twists through which the suspense builds, the tension explodes, not with a bang but with a dead calm.

The writing of *The Coyote Bleeds* is first class. Hunt's personal tribulations are interwoven with the murder investigation and the small everyday incidents of police life, which makes the show so realistic. Wonderful one-liners, which are funny albeit politically

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'Coyote Bleeds'

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incorrect, are sprinkled throughout.

But what really makes the show is Peter Appel's performance as Hunt. A consummate professional, Mr. Appel molds the role to his circumstances; when he comes down with laryngitis, he tones down Hunt's character from a vociferous presence to a man who threatens with hoarse half-whispers a la Robert De Niro (with whom incidentally Mr. Appel is co-starring in the soon-to-be-released movie "Sleeper").

Director Jeff Cohen is quick to capitalize on the shift, and in the climactic confrontation scene between Hunt and the ADA, Joyce Ann Lee effectively matches Mr. Appel with muted menace rather than yells.

Although intended as a window into the world of police abuse and race-based crime solving, *The Coyote Bleeds* is much more than that. It is a spotlight on the soul of a man at the moment when the underpinnings of every facet of his life suddenly collapse and he is left alone, bereft of even his own philosophy of life.