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'RUSH' serves as a haven from election

By Jeffrey Bruner

An election-year tonic to soothe anyone whose politics are to the left of Genghis Khan, "Rush Limbaugh in Night School" offers a two-hour fantasy escape from the presidential campaign.

Charlie Varon's biting political satire from 1994 got some clever updating and free-spirited performances Thursday night at the Vaudeville Mews in Des Moines. All that was missing was a reference to fellow conservative blowhard Bill O'Reilly in a falafel restaurant.

Varon performed his play as a one-man show, but even with a cast of seven this production has plenty of roles (25 in all) to go around.

Thatcher Williams has the stature and mannerisms to pull off Rush, who decides to take Spanish classes (in disguise) after he gets into a ratings war with an up-and-coming Latino broadcaster. He falls in love with Nina (Karen Burkett-Sandoval), a fellow divorcee with more than a few secrets.



Thatcher Williams as Rush Limbaugh

Fish-out-of-water hysterics ensue as Rush comes into contact with all of the things so foreign to him - feminists, people with accents, public transportation. His downfall is inevitable, of course, but not before the play skewers everyone from the late Spalding Gray to Jackie Mason to tree-huggers.

The story, which becomes more absurd by the minute, eventually sprawls to

encompass a production of "Othello," a gay performance artist, a massive asteroid, space-age condoms, lots of rolling R's and plenty of Ben and Jerry's ice cream. The whole notion - crazy as it seems - of someone like Limbaugh reinventing himself for the better is appealing if somewhat absurd. But hey, this is a fantasy.

The strong supporting cast includes Michael Cornelison as the narrator, Timothy Larson as a bizarre French philosopher and broadcaster J. Neil Rodriguez, and Barbara Martin as an FBI agent and a wacky Israeli somatic feminist who exhorts her audience to get in touch with their bodies. Literally.

"Rush Limbaugh in Night School" continues tonight and Sunday and runs through Oct. 24.

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