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Fringe Festival: Plenty passion (and suds!)

The festival runs through Sunday in the Court Avenue District. Read Jeffrey Bruner's critiques from performances from the first three days of the weekend event.

Plus, check back on Monday for a wrapup of the weekend.

July 24, 2005

Register theater critic Jeffrey Bruner offers a running critique of the productions at the first Iowa Fringe Festival, which ends Sunday in the Court Avenue District in Des Moines:

"Scooter Thomas Makes It to the Top of the World" / I-You Theatre Company

Peter Parnell's memory play about two adults — one dead, one on the way to the funeral — gets a strong performance from Kehry Anson Lane and Jaret Michael Morlan.

"Scooter" starts out a bit fractured and frenetic, mainly in Lane's delivery, but it quickly smoothes out and finds its groove. It's the combination of the play's dead-on capturing of childhood friendships and the versatile Lane and Morlan that turns the hour into something tender and moving.

The play's emotional arc shifts a little suddenly in the final third, where the now-departed Scooter and his friend need to reconcile, but that may be more a function of trimming the play into the festival's hour time limit. But Lane and Morlan have taken us down such a poignant road by that point that we still leave having spent time with old friends instead of two characters we have just met for the first time.

"Karaoke Killer" / Ankeny Community Theatre

The idea of plunking an old-fashion murder mystery into the middle of a karaoke contest has some promise but Joh Mann's comedy only offers a few laughs.

The singing, especially Keith Pederson's version of "I've Got You Babe," is as good or better than the warbling I've heard in bars over the years but much of the acting was stiff. Not that there's much the cast can do with Mann's play, which tries for laughs by making phonetic jokes out of the characters' names — a bartender named Tip Megood, for starters.

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ZOOM



Kay Mueller of "Theater for a Change" pops out of a washing machine during the show "Dirty Laundry" at the Fringe Festival in Des Moines.

Fringe Festival facts

WHEN: Through Sunday
WHERE: The Vaudeville Mews, Java Joes Coffeehouse and the Trattoria, all on Fourth Street between Court Avenue and Walnut Street; Civic Center of Greater Des Moines' Stoner Studio Theater, 221 Walnut St.
ADMISSION: You need to have a \$5 button for the festival, then each show costs \$10.
 Tickets available at each venue as well Fringe Central, 407 Court Ave.
INFO:
www.iowafringe.com

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"Twyla's Boy" / Central Iowa Repertory Theatre

Ruth Ann Gaines and Joseph Leonardi are a good pair to tell Charles Polly's new work about a man growing up gay in rural Appalachia and the mother who eventually comes to accept her son.

Polly's play would be more effective if it covered less ground — some childhood recollections are amusing and fun but dilute the core issue here. But the performances are first-rate, from the accents to Leonardi's child-like speaking and mannerisms when recounting tales when he was 12. The emotional payoff is heavy when it eventually arrives but it packs a punch.

"The Totally True Completely Fictional Story of the Mother of Jesse James" / Mercati / Milligan Productions

An outlaw couldn't ask for a better press agent than his mama. "Even the parts that aren't true are true," says Zerelda James (Mary Bricker) about her boys, famous bandits Frank (Richard Maynard) and Jesse (Andy Elliott).

Cynthia Mercati's play, first presented a few months ago at the Vaudeville Mews, is still run in goofy blow-up-the-third-wall kind of way. Bricker has fine-tuned Zerelda into a funny but still meaner mamaw, capable of raising two of the meanest outlaws north of the Pecos. Elliott, pulling double duty in the festival along with "Art," is funny whiner while Maynard looks like he stepped right out of a 1940s Western.

"Overruled" / Central Iowa Repertory Theater

This performance of George Bernard Shaw's 1912 comedy is an unexpected delight, not to mention an argument that intelligence and sophistication have no business mixing with love.

Joseph Leonardi, Sara Ostbloom, John Robinson and Laura Weise are fine as two couples who fall in love with the other's spouse and then try to sort matters out in and adult fashion. The rapid-fire wit is a treat and the play itself has aged well — you can only imagine the uproar when it was first presented almost a century ago.

"A Banter New Year" / Tallgrass Theatre Company

Shadley Grei's comedy about a long-distance friendship between a straight woman (Sarah Noll) and a gay man (David Kaniunk) mines the territory of "When Harry Met Sally" with moderate success.

Noll and Kaniunk gave a game performance, competing against cranky fuse boxes that kept shorting out the lights and a noisy cappuccino machine at Java Joe's. (Such adversity is almost mandatory in the world of fringe festivals.) Still, the play spends much of its time on the phone and both actors delivered their lines that way instead of projecting.

As for Grei's play, there are some humorous bits inside it although it often uses profanity as a crutch for real emotional expression. (Then again, 20-somethings do tend to do that.) It's also hard to invest much sympathy in the female character, a binge drinker who swears like a sailor and talks on her cell phone anywhere and everywhere.

"Art" / The Corky St. Clair Players

Steve Berry, Mark John Conley and Andy Elliott reprise their savagely funny production of the Tony Award-winning play about three friendships almost shattered by a

20-square-foot piece of white canvass.

Serge (Conley) sees it as art. Marc (Berry) is passionately upset. And Yvan (Elliott) isn't phased one way or another as long as it doesn't harm anyone else.

As Marc angrily puts it to Serge: "You spent \$200,000 on this piece of (expletive)?"

Berry and Conley are great sparring partners and Elliott, as a soon-to-be married but already henpecked underachiever, delivers a gut-splitting monologue on — of all things — wedding invitations. Rarely has watching someone's manhood been shredded to bits been this hilarious.

"Voices" / Rainbow Center

Thomas Perrine's collection of stories of Iowans with mental illness is a sobering and sincere experience that's honest but never searches for pity.

The actors in the readers' theater presentation — Christopher Young, Ron Gilbert, Kim Benda, Jeffrey Campbell, T. Valada-Viars, Becky Scholtec and Melissa Kellar — give a precise, rapid delivery that keeps the show moving briskly and avoids the lulls that often come with spoken-word performances.

While "Voices" deals with a serious subject, it wisely avoids the temptation to preach and even finds a bittersweet humor in the frustrations of a dysfunctional health-care system and a society that has only begun to grasp the enormity of mental illness.

"Medicine Show" / Aggravated Assault Ensemble

This Iowa City company's raunchy satire about cosmetic surgery is hands-down the truest "fringe" play in the festival and it pushes comfort levels while riffing on everything from circus freaks to llamas to toothless baritones.

There's a method, of course, in the madness of playwright and director Michael Sokoloff ("Mustapha's Bride"), whose snake-oil salesman offers a magic elixir that allows his patients/suckers to achieve "the right to be perfect." Smoothing out all of society's rough edges, of course, leaves us in the end looking odder than the circus freaks that made us cringe in the first place.

Due to mature content and male nudity, this show is definitely for adult audiences.

"No Exit" / FLB Productions

Jean-Paul Sartre's existential comedy gets an intense performance from David Oddy, Sue Gerver and Suzie Spicer as three people who discover that hell is other people ... with ugly chairs and no mirrors.

Oddy in particular brings fierceness to Vincent, the war deserter who finds himself alone in a room with a lusty lesbian (Gerver) and an adulteress (Spicer). There's more to it than that, naturally, but director Desiree Dixon builds the tension as the three circle each other and take turns tormenting one another.

As bleakly comical as Sartre's is, there's a common (and convincingly delivered) refrain from each character: "What I wish for one day so I could go back and set them straight." It would almost seem hopeful if it wasn't so obvious that these damned souls will never be able to set their own lives straight.

"Dirty Laundry" / Theater ... for a Change

Here we have four loads of comedies about relationships with the strongest the hilarious "Soap Opera," written by David Ives. Imagine the possibilities when the lonely washing machine repairman (Thatcher Williams) has too much time on his hands and you'll end up a heap of something ... unclean.

Ives has moved on to much more weighty subjects, like the controversial Bush/Blair/Iraq war drama "Stuff Happens," but his surreal tale of a man's love for major appliances is something to be seen.

Williams is plausibly the love child of Gordon Jump, and Amy Burgmaier is funny as the girlfriend with the eternal jelly stain. Then there's Kay Mueller, in the costume of bubbles, as well ... you'll just have to see for yourself.

The first two shorts, "Guys" and "So Tell Me About This Guy," are standard riffs on the mysterious worlds of how men and women talk about the opposite sex when they are amongst themselves. "Saturday Night," a comedy about a dysfunctional couple, is a step above — adequate proof that a little intellectualism can be a dangerous thing.

"Passionate Compassion" / Drama Workshop

Tina Haase Findlay has the germ of something here with an interesting social commentary that combines poetry, song, spoken word, sermon and spirituals. Christine Ledo, Melissa Maestas and Lyra Halsten perform three interwoven monologues, separated by songs sung by Findlay and accompanied by Brandon Findlay and Ben Williams on guitar.

The songs, particularly "I Am The Blues" and "Higher (It's a Love Thing)," are ahead of the monologues at this point in the production. Halsten's monologue on an abused wife rings truer than a separate one about a woman with AIDS, which feels set about 15 years ago instead of the present day.

The overlaying theme, that we need to stop and feel and search within ourselves to discover true compassion, carries some weight that moves the audience. A call to action, however, modeled after a call and response in church, might benefit with a bit softer approach — but that's all a matter of how spicy you like to season your sermons.



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