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Dark satire livens up 'The Dead Guy'

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The pitch is simple: One man gets one week to spend \$1 million.

And then he has to die.

Now, most people would run away from an offer like that. But most people aren't Eldon Phelps, the fictional star of "The Dead Guy," Theater . . . For a Change's darkly comic satire about "reality" TV. The play opened Thursday and runs through Dec. 16.

Eldon (played by TFAC newcomer Mike Tweeton) is a loser. His girlfriend dumped him, his boss fired him and his landlord is ready to give him the boot. So when a TV producer offers him a weeklong spending spree, he jumps at the chance.

"I could spend it in one day, dude!" he yells. "Right off, I'd replace all my Zeppelin CDs!"

But soon enough, he considers the gruesome price: Death by lethal injection, bus accident, bullet or chainsaw, depending on how TV viewers vote. When he hesitates, producer Gina Yaweth (Jami Bassman) circles in to seal the deal.

"You can either drag yourself from day to day to day to day like the living dead for the rest of your meaningless life, leaving nothing behind but bad memories," she says, building her pep talk like a motivational speaker. "Or you can go out like a supernova, shining light to lead the world to a better, brighter tomorrow."

Eldon takes the bait, signs his name on the dotted line and resolves to make the most of his last days on Earth. All of a sudden, he's like a kid trying to switch from Santa's naughty list to the nice one. And while he doesn't exactly clear a path to a brighter tomorrow, it's fun to watch Tweeton promote the character from self-absorbed slacker to big-hearted lug.

Unfortunately, Bassman doesn't give the producer the same treatment. Her character, who should be ruthless — or better, delusional — seems to genuinely empathize with Eldon from the get-go. Instead of gradually developing a conscience over the course of the play, she flip-flops throughout, torn between a desperate struggle for higher ratings and plain old compassion. While the portrayal humanizes the character, it robs the play of some of its humor.

After all, the producer is the one who brought the world such reality hits as "French Kiss," a show about "five divorced pop stars who go to Paris to fight over one French hunk," and an animal-taming competition called "Heavy Petting."

The production has other flaws, too. A hand-held video camera projects most of the on-stage action onto a large screen mounted above the stage. Although it magnifies some of the actors' facial expressions, the constant motion can be a dizzying distraction. And there's a disconnect when a warm-up comedian (Travis Cherniss) tells a few jokes before the play officially begins. Since the subject is reality TV, the idea of a studio audience doesn't make sense.

Even so, director Ann Wilkinson and audio-visual designer Thatcher Williams win points for ambition. In addition to the main screen above the stage, six other TV monitors adorn the set, providing a mix of scenic cues and funny homemade advertisements.

The screens serve up what has become a fixture of reality-TV finales, a schmaltzy recap of the entire season, complete with music and still shots.

The rest of the cast, too, deserves credit for their supporting roles.

Michael DeNato plays the seen-it-all cameraman; Shoshana Salowitz plays Eldon's justifiably baffled girlfriend; John Cisar is Eldon's straight-laced brother; and Mary Bricker hams it up as

their low-rent mom. When cameras ambush her for the first time, she stumbles out of her bedroom in a bathrobe and a serious case of bad hair. Eldon tells her it's a reality TV show, and she jabs back: "Nobody wants this much real."

Come to think of it, that sums up the whole idea behind "The Dead Guy." In a society that alternately loves and loathes shows such as "Survivor" and "Intervention," nobody seems to know when or if reality TV will fizzle out.

"Reality TV is on its last legs," Gina tells Eldon. "It's wheezing and stumbling around blind, groping for any lifeline."

Maybe, maybe not. But the important thing — at least according to Gina and the real-life TV bigwigs who stand to profit — is to keep watching.

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"The Dead Guy"

WHEN: 7:30 tonight and Dec. 12-15 and 2 p.m. Sunday and Dec. 16

WHERE: Grand View College's Viking Theatre, 2811 E. 14th St. Presented by Theater ... For a Change

TICKETS: \$10, available at iowatix.com or at the door.

ONLINE: To see video clips and blogs by the play's characters, visit thedeadguy.com.
