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Winter One Acts!!!

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 January 19th, 2007 by Chris Holt

The Winter One Acts this year attempt to tackle much larger issues than previous editions of this Ram's Head tradition. If nothing else, these plays, all very distinct, are ambitious in their goals and epic in their implications.

In Sick! an illness is sweeping a college campus. Sean is trying to keep his room sterile, and Kenneth Lam plays him as an awkward and neurotic nerd fittingly. Unfortunately, he still has to deal with a desperate Don Juan of a roommate, Dave. Tom Wiltzius depicts the obnoxious Dave who says "PS" and "Newsflash" too much and only complicates an uncomfortable roommate relationship with some vague sexual tension.

In one of the more absurd moments of the play, Dave's ex-girlfriend, Joanne, enters the room fittingly dressed in a hazardous materials suit. She enters without much explanation, and other characters come in and out of Sean and Dave's room for equally confusing reasons. A mysterious Elsie and Joanne's current flame, Barry, all seem to be dumped into the room to sort out each other's feelings.

There were funny moments and notable performances, however. Liane Al-Ghusain plays the seductive Elsie with dynamism and suave ease, and while you scratch your head at what she's saying, it's delivered with sass. The dialogue becomes overloaded with the blurring of sickness, love, changing loyalties and apple puns.

While ambitious, the philosophy and the plot become convoluted at times. Sick! has a memorable finish though, and the relationship between Elsie and Sean deservedly holds the audience's attention when the curtain drops.

The Ladies' Apocalypse is essentially two plays in one. It's about the larger collapse of the universe in 200 years and then it's about the collapse of three couple's relationships in the near future. The beginning scenes revolve around a psychological phenomenon known as Housewife's Depression, which affects a Kansas wife, her former high school lab partner's fiancée, and the First Lady. While all three actresses embody their characters well, the cynical and confident Lauren Hayes steals the show as the First Lady.

The overarching message is that the smaller relationships' destructions are equally important as the end of the universe. Moments of dark humor are scattered throughout the play, generating more than a few chuckles from the audience. Annabel Colby's, played with a believable twang by E. Grace Davis, confessions of her football obsessed Kansas hometown provided a counterpoint to Hayes' sardonic quips of her life married to a JFK wannabe. AJ Balance's presidential impersonation needs more stage time because it is striking in its believability. The periodic narrations by the scientists moved the plots along, but snappier and funnier dialogue is essential to justify the transitions.

Unfortunately, the play seems to be wrestling with its identity as much as the characters are with the catastrophe. Is it a dark comedy, a tragic catastrophe play, or a dystopic satire? Sometimes the humor is dark because the actors believe the catastrophe is real, but at other points their reactions are campy and unrealistic. The play is the most plot driven of the three, and the pacing is at times slow, but once all the subplots are introduced, all in all it's a rewarding experience.

But I found myself clapping the loudest for Goliath. Goliath is the story about a boy that becomes a soldier and the effect this has on his family, friends, and most importantly, himself. The writer describes it as more of a "choreopoem" combining the impassioned play of spoken word poetry with a choreographed ensemble. Due to the nature of the play's style, the audience understands that they are being spoken to as much as the other characters, and thus the audience comes away as emotionally drained and shell shocked as the characters therein. It's an effective tool, if somewhat formulaic. At times, I found myself wondering how this character was going to end up breaking down and yelling at the audience.

Goliath tries to encapsulate one family's story, but due to the many facets of American life represented, it becomes much larger and therefore universal. The play operates in caricatures. The best friend plays the naïve and racially insensitive character, the father brings up issues of masculinity and responsibility, the daughter is an anti-war lesbian, etc. But while we quickly despise these caricatures, we also find them sympathetic and familiar. Only the drill sergeant character, played frighteningly well by Langston Wesley, did I find lacking the moral ambiguity of the other personas. If the intended focus of Goliath is to create dialogue, the ambiguities and lack of a moral center in the piece will guarantee plenty of discussion.

Make no mistake about it; there is not a weak link in this cast. The play is an intense and well directed experiment that pays off.

Tickets are \$9 for students. 8 p.m. Pigott Theater.



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