

## THEATER REVIEW

# *THEATER REVIEW; The One-Act as First Act in a Wiser Future*

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When it comes to comedy, if the language flies and the wit outpaces understanding by a step or two, the oldest tricks work best. At least that seems to be the message of three of the four plays in Series A of the Ensemble Studio Theater's Marathon 2000, the company's 23rd annual festival of one-acts.

In Billy Aronson's "Light Years," four freshmen in their first day at college grow faster than light travels as they discover that sex, while it is far from self-discovery, is the foundation of wisdom. Courtney (Anne Marie Nest), who knows that image is everything, is teaching Daphne (Sarah Rose), who is dangerously innocent, how to decide who she is before going to the school's get-acquainted picnic, when Doug (Paul Bartholomew), as squeaky clean as he is clueless, bounds into their room, and Courtney decides he is perfect for Daphne. That is, until Michael (Ian Reed Kesler), the coolest man on campus, comes along, and Daphne falls for him, leaving Courtney with Doug.

But when, after only minutes, Courtney and Doug emerge from a bedroom breathless in towels, everything changes: Courtney was the naif, and Michael was cool only because he never tried. Success in this familiar kind of story depends on flawless pacing, which Jamie Richards, the director, provides; on deft shifts in the tone and meaning of Mr. Aronson's

dialogue that you only catch when they trigger emotional explosions; and on the actors' ability to let you feel the shock of totally unexpected passions without stepping for a moment out of the bright, brittle characters these people think they are.

In this performance of what is to be the first act of a full-length play in progress, it all works perfectly, and the stunning end leaves you wondering what could possibly happen in the rest of the play.

Leslie Ayvasian has come into her own as a writer in "Twenty Four Years," a 12-minute play encapsulating two lifetimes. It is polished down to the last period. A husband (Victor Slezak) and wife (Ms. Ayvasian) mark their 24th anniversary with a little dancing (or as he says, swaying), the awkward grace of which perfectly catches the uncertain rhythms of her mercurial feelings.

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On the page the dialogue would appear to be the kind of clipped code that hides tired familiarity in most people. Under the direction of Curt Dempster, the founder of the Ensemble Studio, Ms. Ayvasian and Mr. Slezak turn it into a hide-and-seek game of great warmth and humor that compels viewers to hold back their laughter until it all pours out at the end, when each player finds out in a single glance how much fun the other one continues to be, and how elusive.

"Little Airplanes of the Heart" by Steven Feffer, which was published a couple of years ago, is more formulaic than either of those two, but galvanized by a very well-chosen cast under Eliza Beckwith's direction. The imagination of a boy, Sam (A. J. Shively), is totally captivated by his uncle John (William Wise), a 300-pound man in Cape Cod who wedges himself into a homemade ultra-light airplane and heads off for Montana. He falls from the sky in North Dakota.

Sam's mother, his aunt, his teacher and especially his mischievous cousin Jilly (Shayna Levine) try to distract him, but his heart is forever in that flight, and so his uncle remains throughout the play in his cockpit in the clouds talking to the boy as though he had never ended up as a pile of ashes in a cornfield.

There is too much busy stuff in this play of less than half an hour, from a rabbi's ridiculous memorial prayer to the sexual teasing of children too young to know exactly what they mean. But the actors lob these lumps at one another as though they were eggs, each one

daring the others to drop one, and there is surprisingly little mess. It also helps that the two youngest actors, Mr. Shively and Ms. Levine, are superbly disciplined.

Romulus Linney's "Madmen" is the pattern breaker in this series, a somber meditation on ignorance, difference and intolerance set in late 15th-century Spain, when Torquemada was the Grand Inquisitor -- one act of a three-part drama called "Spain." An insane man condemned to the flames for saying he is Jesus is befriended by the abbot of a monastery where he is being held, and the truth that emerges from their conversation turns religious belief on its head.

The premise is far too easy. Once the madman-as-God begins to object that theologians resort to jargon to obscure the fact that they cannot face the truth about him, anyone in the audience who is familiar with criticism of religion from Montaigne to now can complete the piece. And any theatergoer can predict the conversion, in one way or another, of the abbot.

This is a challenge met with superb confidence by the director, Eileen Myers, a great respecter of silences in a confrontation, and two actors who master the power of understatement, Peter Maloney as the abbot and Ross Gibby as the madman. In their hands material that would glaze the eyes in one minute of reading hold an audience in hushed silence for 20.

Series A runs through Sunday; Series B takes over from May 17 through May 28, and C, the final series, runs from May 31 through June 11.

## MARATHON 2000

### Series A

The 23rd annual festival of new one-act plays. Lighting by Greg MacPherson; sets by Warren Karp; costumes by Amela Baksic; sound by Beatrice Terry; props master, Cynthia Franks; production stage manager, John Thornberry; technical director, Carlo Adinolfi; production manager, Tim Gallagher. Associate producers, Sarah Elkashef and Tom Cavanaugh; Marathon literary manager, Eileen Myers. Presented by the Ensemble Studio Theater, Curt Dempster, artistic director; M. Edgar Rosenblum, executive director; Jamie Richards, executive producer. At 549 West 52nd Street, Clinton.

LITTLE AIRPLANES OF THE HEART, by Steve Feffer; directed by Eliza Beckwith.

WITH: Elaine Bromka (Lorraine), Shayna Levine (Jilly), Peter Lewis (Farmer, Rabbi and Principal), A. J. Shively (Sam), Ann Talman (Cheryl) and William Wise (Uncle John).

LIGHT YEARS, by Billy Aronson; directed by Jamie Richards.

WITH: Anne Marie Nest (Courtney), Sarah Rose (Daphne), Paul Bartholomew (Doug) and Ian Reed Kesler (Michael).

TWENTY FOUR YEARS, by Leslie Ayvazian; directed by Curt Dempster.

WITH: Ms. Ayvazian (Wife) and Victor Slezak (Husband).

MADMEN, By Romulus Linney; directed by Eileen Myers.

WITH: Peter Maloney (Abbot Escobedo de la Aixa) and Ross Gibby (the Madman).