

## THEATER REVIEW

# *THEATER REVIEW; Squeezing Big Ideas Into Small Packages*

By Bruce Weber

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May 15, 2002, Section E, Page 5 Buy Reprints

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Is there any setting for a play more hackneyed than a school reunion? At the start of "Reunions," Billy Aronson's one-act play at the Ensemble Studio Theater, three recognizable types -- a single career woman, a pregnant wife and a perennially ignorable nerd -- begin trading their apt and ordinary life stories around the punch table, and in the audience your eyes blink from the dust being blown off this antique cliché, and your heart sinks in disbelief.

This, it turns out, is exactly what Mr. Aronson and his deft director, Jamie Richards, want, and I confess, I took the bait. Suddenly the play takes a decidedly loopy turn, and the delight is all the more piquant for being a surprise. The next character to enter (played by Grant Shaud of "Murphy Brown" fame) is wearing an eye patch and a red-and-blue horizontal-striped shirt: he's become a pirate.

From then on, the alumni who show up (including a major celebrity whom you'll know but never guess) have, suffice it to say, unusual résumés. That the reunion proceeds with every familiar emotional trapping nonetheless (Mr. Shaud's pirate turns out to be a striver who repeats the story of his big triumph ad nauseam and is jealous of other pirates) is funny and even touching. And when all the attendees wind up on the dance floor, it ends as most reunions do, with good cheer.

As the closing entry in the first round of the studio theater's annual marathon of one-act plays, "Reunions" brought a welcome breeze of lightheartedness to an otherwise rather stuffy evening. Each of the three other plays -- "Lark" by Romulus Linney, "Salvage Baas" by Brian Silberman and "Why I Followed You" by Lisa-Maria Radano -- is tainted by a pedantic tone, as if the playwrights were unable to squeeze their themes into a single act and resorted to lectures instead. (These four plays, Series A of the marathon, continue through Sunday. Series B runs from May 22 to June 2, Series C June 5 to 16.)

In "Lark," set in 1910 and adapted from a novel by Willa Cather, Mr. Linney writes about Thea Kronborg (Winslow Corbett), a teenager from a tiny Arizona town who has come to Chicago to study piano. The teacher she finds, Albert Sanderson (Chris Hutchison), whose own career as a performer has been quashed by a hand injury, baffles her by focusing on the soul of the music, not the notes. Thea's distress is reflected in her nightly prayers, and though Mr. Linney tries to maintain the tension between student and teacher, the play mostly becomes an elaborate and grandiose metaphor: music as a life force, a godly spirit. It is a noble attempt, but in a single act it all feels a little overblown and undercooked.

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"Salvage Baas" also crams too grand an intention into too tight a narrative. It takes place in a Nigerian village where two men are smoking pot, and one is working to remove parts from a Chrysler that had been ruined in a crash that killed its owner. The playwright, Mr. Silberman, writes in a semidialect that is often difficult to parse; whether it properly reflects the setting I can't say, nor do I know whether the actors, Cyrus Farmer and Geoffrey C. Ewing, are right to speak it with a Caribbean lilt.

In any case, if I followed the discussion, and I'm not sure I did, the Chrysler becomes a symbol for the wreck that American-style dreams have made of Africa, usurping the village culture without effectively modernizing the continent. The result is a painfully convulsed society; yes, one of the men is epileptic.

"Why I Followed You" is graced with two fine performances, one by Toby Poser, as a married woman gripped by a midlife desperation, the other by Felix Solis as the young man she sees on the street and is helplessly drawn to. Their verbal ballet is a delicate one, alternately funny and touching as the man comes to understand her and almost give her what she wants.

Mr. Solis is particularly good at defying the stereotype of the blue-collar character with macho colors; he makes us see that the literal-mindedness of such a man is not impenetrable, that he is capable of appreciating the odd, ambiguous and emotional strains of a person from a different background. Ms. Poser is saddled with an overwritten role that calls for her to explain at not always enlightening length the psyche of a married woman. But she is persuasive and moving in her passionate travails; you know exactly why Mr. Solis's character would want to help her.

## MARATHON 2002

### Series A

The 25th annual festival of new one-act plays presented by the Ensemble Studio Theater, Curt Dempster, artistic director; Susann Brinkley, executive director; Jamie Richards, executive producer. Sarah Elkashef and Elizabeth Furiati, associate producers; Timothy L. Gallagher, production manager. Lighting by Greg MacPherson; sets by Jennifer Varbalow; costumes by Leslie Bernstein; sound by Rob Gould; props supervisor, Ilene Weintraub. At 549 West 52nd Street, Clinton.

LARK, by Romulus Linney; directed by Peter Maloney, from a novel by Willa Cather.

WITH: Winslow Corbett (Thea Kronborg) and Chris Hutchison (Albert Sanderson).

WHY I FOLLOWED YOU, by Lisa-Maria Radano; directed by Deborah Hedwall.

WITH: Toby Poser (Woman), Felix Solis (Man) and Timothy L. Gallagher (Bartender).

SALVAGE BAAS, by Brian Silberman; directed by Seret Scott.

WITH: Cyrus Farmer (Goody Aboo) and Geoffrey C. Ewing (Moses Bobo).

REUNIONS, by Billy Aronson; directed by Jamie Richards.

WITH: Hope Chernov (Tabby Eckersly), Katherine Leask (Sarah Burke Nelson and Connie Cummings), Thomas Lyons (Alan Roads and Brandon Tavelle), Grant Shaud (Rick Arzoomanian) and Maria Gabriele (Nancy McCann).