

Bash

By Neil LaBute, directed by Sean Thomas

February 11 - March 6, 2005

Stella Adler Theatre - Irene Gilbert Theatre

Let me say up front, I am not a fan of monologues, either in plays, or presented as a play itself. Not that there aren't great monologues out there - actors after all have to audition with them. But when the entire play is a monologue, then it is not a play. Nor is it a one-person show, which is not a monologue. Monologues are simply insights, confessions; there is no relationship, no conflict, no crisis, no arc. We "make a scene", not a "monologue". Scenes and plays are active; monologues are passive, insightful. And while monologues can affect plot development, they are not the plot.

"Bash" is an evening of three monologues billed as "plays", each a confession of a dark secret in the speaker's past. Neil LaBute has been "praised and vilified" for his writing of offbeat and/or dark material. And dark these monologues are. In "Iphigenia in Orem", a traveling salesman in a hotel room confesses the cause of his baby's death to a lonely, drunk woman he picked up in the hotel bar. In "Medea Redux", a woman confesses to - one assumes - the police about the death of her son. And in "A Gaggle of Saints", a man and a woman describe a night they traveled into Manhattan for a big bash - referring both to a party and a second, secret event of the evening; hence, one further assumes, the name of the collected monologues.

In the first two pieces, the actors interact with, and respond to, the invisible person they are addressing in an attempt to create a "scene" or relationship with them; in the last piece they just tell their story out into the void to an undefined entity. It is this last piece in particular that brings to light all the difficulties of doing monologues as plays. With no clear reason of why they are telling this story or to whom, this is the weakest of the three pieces. Though these two actors share the stage, each delivers a monologue. They do not interact. They do not affect or respond to each other in any way. And although that is perhaps the point of the monologue - that she continues to have an idyllic vision of him even though he is a monster - it would be far more interesting to watch if it had been written and/or performed as a scene where we can see how he maintains this perfect image of himself in her eyes.

Sean Thomas (Man & John, as well as director) and Carly Craig (Woman & Sue) have an easy sense about them, are comfortable on the stage, and at moments inhabit their characters with intense and interesting nuances. But they suffer from what so many otherwise talented young actors do in this town; they confuse naturalistic acting with being natural in life. Stage intimacy is but an illusion of intimacy, wherein the actors must convey it yet still be heard. As a result, they often mutter, mumble and race through dialogue, failing to be heard and thus, to communicate.

Mr. Thomas as director has likewise failed to physically animate the performances, a particularly challenging task for monologues, resulting in a very static evening. The few choices he did make seemed forced and unnatural, in odd counterpoint to the performances. He did, however, set a very strong mood with the pre-show music and candlelight, creating a disturbing yet oddly appealing atmosphere which the rest of the evening did not quite live up to.

Mr. LaBute's monologues are probably appealing to actors because of their structural complexity and the psychological gymnastics of his characters; however, good writing is not enough to make good theater. Sometimes writing is simply meant to be read.