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THURSDAY, JULY 30, 2009

Review - *Assholes and Aureoles* (Midtown International Theater Festival, InterAction Theater, Inc., and Off The Leash Productions, LLC)

By Bryan Stryker

When a play has a title such as *Assholes and Aureoles*, you know you're not in for a squeaky clean Neil Simon experience.

A series of eight interwoven scenes involving domestic abuse, child molestation, rape, self-identification, sexual harrassment, and more are served up with an extra twist of the knife. Just when you think you know where a scene is heading, it veers off in the opposite direction. This thoroughly engaging (not to mention laugh-out-loud funny) piece comes from the delightfully warped minds of its performers, the spritely Diane Kondrat, her performance partner, the Amazonian Karen Irwin, and playwright Eric Pfeffinger.

"What must it feel like to do such good...and be so hot," muses Kondrat during a monologue, as she holds up an 8x10 glossy of Chris Hansen, host of the "Dateline NBC" program's "To Catch a Predator" series. The wide-eyed admiration and adulation for the investigative reporter glistens from her eyes and you can't help but laugh. From there, she launches into a sexual fantasy involving Hansen as if he was a member of a junior debate team competing at a regional competition in Rochester.

Irwin shines during her monologue about a woman who is about to be raped but

is able to deftly fend off her attacker by claiming it wouldn't be rape, as she would consent to the act.

"But it'll be rough," she growls as the rapist.

"That's the only way I like it," she drawls.

The seriousness of the subject matter and the subversive take Irwin gives the matter makes you squirm while laughing at the same time.

With four solid scenes under their belt, Irwin and Kondrat tackle what is termed in the playbill as "The Long Scene" set in a woman's domestic abuse shelter. Kondrat plays the harried social worker interviewing volunteer Irwin, and takes her through a role play scene of how to handle certain situations. Kondrat's abused wife with an "undeterminable Eastern European accent" and Irwin's social worker soon include other characters like the redneck husband, an Irish coworker, and a good old boy cop.

While the actresses magically throw themselves into these characters, I couldn't help but think that I've seen the same "actress-playing-multiple-parts-in-one-scene" bit done before and much better (Kristine Nielsen in Durang's *Betty's Summer Vacation* comes to mind). The timing seemed off during the performance as if it should have played much quicker with less transitioning between character changes.

Additionally, "long" is a bit of an understatement for the scene, as the it dominates the running time of the show and could have been trimmed by a good five to seven minutes while still maintaining the integrity of the scene. Sadly, the momentum generated by the actresses during their first four scenes is lost during this segment. The goodwill generated from the audience during the prior scenes seemed to slowly dissipate, and the final two scenes dealing with suicide and political correctness did not get the response that it could or should have.

Leonora Trey deftly maneuvers her players across the stage with minimal props and staging. Through the two chairs, a card table, modular boxes, and a few pieces of fabric, Trey, along with lighting designer, Marc Tschida recreates the staging for each scene making it easily recognizable and identifiable within the first few moments of each vignette.

Assholes and Aureoles is a delightful comic romp that requires you to leave your sense of right/wrong, black/white, good/bad at home, and embrace a slightly skewed view of some taboo topics.

Assholes and Aureoles

Written by Eric Pfeffinger

Creative Consultant: Nell Weatherwax

Fight Choreographer: Adam Noble

Lighting Designer: Marc Tschida

Featuring: Diane Kondrat and Karen Irwin

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