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FRIDAY, MARCH 14, 2008

Review - The 8 Minute Madness Playwright Festival (Turtle Shell Productions)

Stage Buzz Review by Byrne Harrison

When dealing with a theatre festival featuring 27 short plays performed in 3 groups by over 40 actors, it's difficult to decide what to talk about. But that's part of the fun of Turtle Shell Production's 8 Minute Madness Playwright Festival. Now in its fifth year, this festival promises a little something for everyone.

Since the festival was divided into three groups, I was not able to attend all three shows. This review will focus on Groups A and C.

Given that there are 18 plays in Groups A and C, to talk about each would be a little cumbersome. Instead, I'll hit some highs and lows. Group A featured some strong plays, though its comedies seem to be most effective. Director Gaye-Taylor Upchurch has a good sense of comic timing which makes the well-written comedies that much stronger and tends to mask the inadequacies of the weaker ones. First among the comedies is Mark Harvey Levine's charming *Surprise*, a cute tale about Peter (Christian O'Brien), an unlucky-in-love psychic who can only see two minutes into the future, Whitney, the girlfriend (Monika Schneider) who is dumping him, and Esther (Constance Parnig), the waitress who eventually shows Peter that love isn't always written in the stars. Featuring some wonderfully timed sight gags, snappy dialogue, and a cast that works seamlessly together, *Surprise* is delightful.

Two other comedies stand out. First is Walter Thinn's *Meeting Without End*. Attendees at this meeting talk in consultant speak, clichés, and aphorisms. As the meeting goes on, the phrases freely mix and mingle (or perhaps mangle) leading each attendee to spew nonsense in an ever more absurd and amusing jumble. Ably overseen

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by Christine Booker as the Meeting Organizer, the play features attendees Robin Madel, Kaolin Bass, and Justin Tensen. To their credit, all four manage the increasingly odd language extremely well. The other strong comedy is Shaun Raviv's *Rats*. This clever tale of a gullible rat (Bill Toscano) who finds some cheese and the fast-talking rat (Christian O'Brien) who convinces him not to eat it manages to work in animal rights, outsourcing, veganism, and blood diamonds. Toscano does a good job as the hungry, but simple rat. O'Brien nails the part of the slick con man (con rat, I suppose) and his come-uppance at the end of the play is wonderful.

To her credit, Upchurch proves equally adept at more dramatic works. The somewhat difficultly named *The Ta Ta Song of the Aftermore: Movement One*, Constance Parnig's meditation on memory and loss, is directed with an almost liquid motion that suits the material. In Parnig's play, three sisters (Santana Dempsey, Monika Schneider, and Christine Booker) remember the night their mother left, each in her own way. *Parthy and Me* by Ben Lewis seems at first to be an awkward morning after between Parthy (Emily Coffin) and Paul (Rob Welsh). As the play turns to confessions about broken hearts, desire, and need, Upchurch slows the pace, allowing the actors time to show some of their characters' depth and motivations. Not an easy thing to do in an 8-minute play.

The acting in Group A is generally strong. Noteworthy examples are Christian O'Brien in *Surprise* and *Rats*, Christine Booker as a woman dealing with a friend who'd had a stroke in *Struck*, Eric Edward Glawe as an earnest love-struck elephant in *Elephants and Coffee*, and Emily Coffin in *Parthy and Me*.

Group C features more dramatic work, though most of them do have their comedic moments as well. Two plays in particular stand out. First is Nina Mansfield's powerful play about harassment, *Smile*. Set in a police station, a Man (Bristol Pomeroy) and Woman (Pia Ambardar) each give statements concerning an assault. The beauty of this play, and much of the credit goes to Pomeroy and Ambardar, is that each character garners the audience's sympathy at some point and at the end of the play, two different members of the audience could very easily disagree as to whether the Man or Woman were at fault. Director David Letwin does an outstanding job using an economy of movement. The second noteworthy play is Jeremy Handelman's *Tic-Tac-Toe* in which the game is used as a metaphor for the various patterns that we can't escape in our lives. As the manipulative Kenny (Byron Loyd) recovers from surgery, his sister Stacey (Lauren Robert),

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 Awards (4)
 Cabaret (3)
 Children (1)
 Festival (12)
 Frigid New York (2)
 Fringe 2006 (1)
 Fringe 2008 (5)
 Fundraiser (5)
 Musical (6)
 News (6)
 NYMTF (2)
 One Night (1)
 Provincetown (2)
 Reading (2)
 Review (76)
 Roadtrip Review (1)

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▼ 2009 (47)

▼ July (8)

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a woman who is "flypaper for emotionally needy men," plans her escape into the arms of the man she believes is her last shot at love. An interesting piece, it shows Handelman's skill with family drama.

Other interesting plays in Group C include *Scripted* by Mark Harvey Levine, in which a couple, Elaine (Danielle Faitelson) and Simon (Collin Smith) awake to find that someone has left them a script of their day, each action and word they'll speak already set down on paper, and *Low & Away* by Demetra Kareman, in which Frank (Bristol Pomeroy) and Carol (Elise Rovinsky) try to raise an "alpha" daughter, but worry that neither is up to the task.

Group C also features one of the more risky works, Spence Porter's *Men/Women*, where a battle of the sexes is played out using only two words of dialogue: Men and Women. Gamely and kinetically directed by David Ledoux, this show has some good moments, but Porter's conceit quickly grows tired. One must admire his daring, however, and Turtle Shell is to be commended for trying it out.

The performances in Group C are at times hit or miss, especially among some of the younger actors. However, Group C does feature some excellent work by Bristol Pomeroy. As the father in *Low & Away*, the assault victim in *Smile*, and a man running a stoop sale in *The Dali Lama Drinks His Own Pee* (certainly the most intriguingly named play in the festival), Pomeroy excels.

Each Group's audience voted for the top four plays from that night. The winners of Group A (*The Ta Ta Song of the Aftermore: Movement One, Parthy and Me, Meeting Without End, and Rats*), Group B (*Abuse from Another Life, What's on Your Mind, A Lovely Moon, and Our Lady of the Sea*) and Group C (*Low & Away, Smile, Tic-Tac-Toe, and I Understand Your Frustration*) will duke it out this week in the final competition. Only one playwright will be chosen as the winner of the 8 Minute Madness Playwright Festival. That winner, along with the winners of the outstanding actor awards, will be announced at the Awards & Gala event at The Irish Rogue this Sunday, March 16th at 6 PM.

Since this week's fare includes the best of each series, if you want to see the best of Turtle Shell and the Terrapin Troupe (their acting company), now is the time to visit the Times Square Arts Center.

Playwrights: Group A - Mark Harvey Levine (*Surprise*), J. Stephen Brantley (*Struck*), Rich Rubin (*A Most Unsuitable Conversation*),

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Aoise Stratford (*Elephants and Coffee*), Constance Parnig (*The Ta Ta Song of the Aftermore: Movement One*), Ben Lewis (*Parthy and Me*), Walter Thinnes (*Meeting Without End*), Shaun Raviv (*Rats*), Henry W. Kimmel (*The Dilemma of a Standing Ovation*); Group B – Fran Handman (*Abuse from Another Life*), Jane Prendergast (*The Diers*), Ann-Marie Oliva (*Momology*), Edward Musto (*Poor Hearts*), Rich Espey (*Peelers*), David Fox (*What's on Your Mind*), Evan Guilford-Blake (*A Lovely Moon*), John Buczko (*The Final Chuckle*), Aoise Stratford (*Our Lady of the Sea*); Group C - Spence Porter (*Men/Women*), Mark Harvey Levine (*Scripted*), Demetra Kareman (*Low & Away*), Lynn Snyder (*Don't Look!*), Nina Mansfield (*Smile*), Eric Alan Bower (*The Dali Lama Drinks His Own Pee*), Jeremy Handelman (*Tic-Tac-Toe*), Steven Korbar (*I Understand Your Frustration*), William Munt (*Big Red Button*)

Directed by Gaye-Taylor Upchurch, John W. Cooper, Arthur French, David Ledoux, David Letwin

Stage Managers: Nate Brauner and Amanda-Mae Goodridge
 Producer/Artistic Director: John W. Cooper Assistant Production Manager: Amanda-Mae Goodridge Scenic Designer: Ryan Scott
 Lighting Designer: Eric Larson Costume and Props: Christina Gianinni
 Sound Design: Susan Smale

Featuring in Group A - *Surprise*: Monika Schneider (Whitney), Christian O'Brien (Peter), Constance Parnig (Esther); *Struck*: Christine Booker (Veronica), Bobby Tuttle (Adrian), Rob Welsh (Brit); *A Most Unsuitable Conversation*: Justin Tensen (A), Bill Toscano (B); *Elephants and Coffee*: Robin Madel (Woman), Eric Edward Glawe (Elephant); *The Ta Ta Song of the Aftermore: Movement One*: Santana Dempsey (August), Monika Schneider (Ava), Christine Booker (Elizabeth); *Parthy and Me*: Rob Welsh (Boy/Paul), Emily Coffin (Girl/Parthy); *Meeting Without End*: Christine Booker (Meeting Organizer), Robin Madel (Confirmed Attendee), Kaolin Bass (Requested Attendee), Justin Tensen (Tentative Attendee); *Rats*: Bill Toscano (Rat), Christian O'Brien (Tar); *The Dilemma of a Standing Ovation*: Kaolin Bass (Adam), Audra George (Eli), Natalie Anderson (Mavis), Santana Dempsey (Tara), Justin Tensen (Jerry)

Featuring in Group B - *Abuse from Another Life*: Traci Hovel (Ernest), Justin Morck (Prudence), Jonathan M. Castro (Armand); *The Diers*: Deidre Lynn (Betty), Kendall Zwillman (Hele), Susan Wallack (Sally), Anna Savant (Nurse); *Momology*: Coleen Sciacca

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(Mom #1), Ingrid Kullberg-Bendz (Mom #2), Barbra Ann Smilko (Mom #3); *Poor Hearts*: Alison Crane (Young Lady), Justin Morck (Young Man), Tony Mirchandani (Driver); *Peelers*: Cynthia Fellowes (Bookmaker), Jonathan M. Castro (Marengo), Carol Lambert (Miss Anna); *What's on Your Mind*: Tony Mirchandani (Dave), Cynthia Fellowes (Karen), Jonathan M. Castro (Jeff); *A Lovely Moon*: Traci Hovel (Julia), Barbra Ann Smilko (Lynn), Tony Mirchandani (Warren); *The Final Chuckle*: Benato Biridin (Jackie Jordan), Edward Sheldon (Father L.D. Riley); *Our Lady of the Sea*: Justin Morck (Brother), Bill Toscano (Father), Jonathan M. Castro (Boyfriend)

Featuring in Group C - *Men/Women*: Bernardo Cubria (He 1), Mark Becker (He 2), Annie Mistak (She 1), Emily Elizabeth Simoness (She 2); *Scripted*: Danielle Faitelson (Elaine), Collin Smith (Simon); *Low & Away*: Bristol Pomeroy (Frank), Elise Rovinsky (Carol); *Don't Look!*: Kaolin Bass (Paul), Annie Mistak (Cheryl); *Smile*: Bristol Pomeroy (Man), Pia Ambardar (Woman); *The Dali Lama Drinks His Own Pee*: Bristol Pomeroy (Sherwin), Emily Elizabeth Simoness (Lisa), Patrick Cann (Tim), Tara Gadowski (Angela), Bernardo Cubria (Nathan), Shiloh Klein (Babs); *Tic-Tac-Toe*: Lauren Robert (Stacey), Byron Loyd (Kenny); *I Understand Your Frustration*: Patrick Cann (Ted), Pia Ambardar (Brad); *Big Red Button*: Bernardo Cubria (1), Mark Becker (2)

The Turtle's Shell Theater (in the Times Square Arts Center)
300 W. 43rd Street

Through March 15
Wed.-Fri.: 8 PM; Sat.: 3 and 8 PM

Awards & Gala Event: Sunday, March 16 (see
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Tickets: Theater Mania 212-352-3101

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