

**Crime scenes to keep you smiling In "Fill in the Blank!," corpses solve their own murders, television sets control their viewers, and nothing is as it seems.**

In the well-heeled spoof of British whodunits that opens the impeccably staged "Fill in the Blank!" at Hollywood's 2nd Stage Theatre, a murdered sexual predator's appetites are described as being so voracious that he not only slept on the sofa -- he slept with the sofa. Rounding out the extensive list of suspects, "Even the furniture wanted him dead."

Welcome to the whimsical absurdist universe of David Ives, where corpses gamely join in solving their own murders, television sets seize control of their viewers, and every construction worker harbors a secret aristocratic lineage. Like the better known "All in the Timing," this original anthology of six short comedies for the thinking person (culled with special permission from the author's complete works) showcases Ives' genius for that uniquely American quality that novelist John Barth once called "cheerful nihilism."

Colorful retro styling and catchy 1960s pop snippets set an appropriately breezy tone as each segment addresses a metaphysical conundrum and carries it through to hilarious extremes. In "The Mystery at Twicknam Vicarage," an inebriated shooting victim (Travis Schuldt) confronts his lingering existential doubts about his recently ventilated ventricles.

Replete with exotic femme fatales (Johanna McKay and Thia Stephan), a cleric (Brian Carpenter) whose faith is as challenged as his effete pronunciation, and a trenchant trenchcoat-wearing sleuth (Harry Murphy), this lead-off parody is the evening's most conventional entry -- but under Daniel Henning's crisp direction, the consummate performances ease us gracefully into loftier flights of fancy.

In "Mere Mortals," James Kerwin directs a trio of hard hats (Steve Heller, Bill Dempsey, Jeff McCredie) perched atop skyscraper scaffolding as their lunch break banter meanders from absurd speculation ("Did you guys ever think of hang gliding home from here?") to increasingly improbable confessions about their origins ("I was the Lindbergh baby").

The zaniness of these revelations is rivaled only by their acceptance as matter-of-fact. The evening's laugh-garnering champ is "Captive Audience," (directed by Darin Anthony) in which a couple (Gregory Thirloway, Lee D'Angelo), gradually realize that the generic characters on their television (brilliantly voiced by Warren Davis, Julie Cohen) are studying them and subtly mirroring their real-life problems in perky announcements to imprison them in a sitcom hell from which there is no escape ("The remote is only a placebo....")

In "Seven Menus," a trendy restaurant provides a Petri dish for revolving door relationships as two socializing couples change partners at the ring of a bell (a favorite Ives reality-altering device). Heidi Fecht joins the previous performers as each character modulates in response to the person they're with. Kerwin directs.

For the Anthony-staged "Speed the Play," the ensemble performs a whirlwind tag-team David Mamet retrospective ("Four plays in seven minutes!"), presided over by Julie Cohen's spot-on impersonation of the cigar-chomping maestro of four-letter invectives.

The Henning-directed closer, "Degas, C'est Moi" is a sweetly sentimental story of an unemployed nobody (Richard Kline) who paradoxically discovers his own identity by living a single day in the persona of the Impressionist painter.

If theatrical excellence really is "all in the timing," this chance to indulge in acid-free laughter without dumbing down our critical faculties could not be more opportune.

-- Philip Brandes