

Backstage West - 10/29/2008

U.S. Drag

October 30, 2008

By Les Spindle

The title of Gina Gionfriddo's edgy comedy derives from an expression in William S. Burroughs' novel *Naked Lunch*, in which a character describes a "particularly American kind of longing." Urban ennui looms large in this offbeat satire, making its West Coast debut. Director Darin Anthony's staging for Furious Theatre Company offers a respectable rendition of a thought-provoking but flawed work.

Gionfriddo portrays modern-day Manhattan as a microcosm of crass American values: Two shallow college graduates (Katie Davies and Megan Goodchild) seek easy routes to fame and fortune, trying to locate a serial attacker to obtain the hefty cash reward; a budding writer (Shawn Lee) fabricates a sensationalistic past in his pseudo-autobiography; and a media circus surrounding crimes of violence becomes fodder for needy opportunists, scrambling for their pieces of a warped American dream. Underscoring the zany character interactions are sobering reflections on how some people create illusions of emotional trauma and allow these psychoses to affect their life paths. Quite funny at times, the play is giddier than its dark edges and cynical points might lead one to expect, but it ultimately falls victim to overreaching ambitions and diffuse dramaturgy — too much going on with too little coherence. And some of Gionfriddo's themes have been thoroughly explored in other works; Chicago comes to mind.

Davies and Goodchild are effective in spots, but their portrayals could use more satiric bite; these characters suggest a cross between Paris Hilton and Anna Nicole Smith, and we need to see that sort of dysfunctional wackiness. Lee is funny and a bit frightening as the flash-in-the-pan writer. Eric Pargac garners laughs as a groupie who obsesses over connecting with crime victims when he should be getting a life of his own; also hilarious is Noah Harpster as head of a very peculiar crime-watch group. Good support comes from Nick Cernoch, Johanna McKay, and Saffron Henke in other roles.

A sharp production design — highlighted by Dan Jenkins' set and lights — captures the hustle and bustle of the urban jungle. Doug Newell provides an ambient tech-rock score and superb sound effects.