

Variety 10/29/2008

U.S. Drag

(Carrie Hamilton Theater, Pasadena; 72 seats; \$30 top)

By BOB VERINI

A Furious Theater Company presentation of a play in one act by Gina Gionfriddo.
Directed by Darin Anthony.

Angela - Megan Goodchild

Allison - Katie Davies

Christopher - Shawn Lee

James - Eric Pargac

Ned - Nick Cernoch

Mary Stone - Johanna McKay

Evan - Noah Harpster

Manager/Janice/Bartender/ Christen - Saffron Henke

Gina Gionfriddo's "U.S. Drag" resembles a Christopher Durang farce with a social consciousness. It swarms with Durang's patented self-absorbed, overgrown infants who even sound like him ("I was morbidly obese in grade school. You'd think someone would have said something, asked me why I was so big. And sad"), thrown into the urban horror of a serial killer on the loose. Such dicey material requires precise treatment, which it fails to receive in the Furious Theater Company's West Coast premiere production. Uncertainty of tone and inconsistent playing generate less furiousness than indifference.

Hosts for this tour of contemporary folly are wry Angela (Megan Goodchild) and spunky Allison (Katie Davies), cum laude grads who never seem to have cracked a book. On the make in Gotham, they scorn entry-level jobs in search of a fast track to what Allison calls "living comfortably ... I want a lot while I'm still pretty enough to enjoy it!" She spells it out even more candidly later on: "It's about mattering. ... I just want to matter."

Of all the advancement opportunities available to attractive, educated young women, these two -- for reasons best known to Gionfriddo -- choose to stalk an elusive psychopath for the \$100,000 reward. Even more implausibly, they fall in with a self-defense, self-help squad warning New Yorkers against "Ed," who pretends distress to attract Samaritans he can ambush. (The "Don't Help" advice for those who'd avoid Ed is one of the numerous sociological ironies in which the play traffics.)

Gionfriddo's two thematic strains -- the addiction to celebrity and means, and citizens' responsibility to each other in the face of crisis -- co-exist awkwardly, not least in signaling the audience how seriously or genially to take this material. The

ensemble of Furious regulars and pickups sends mixed signals.

Several -- Johanna McKay as a woebegone but game "Ed" survivor; Nick Cernoch's monomaniacal Wall Street shark; Davies' Reese Witherspoon clone -- possess the ironic distance to communicate a comic sensibility while playing their intentions for real.

By contrast, Shawn Lee's narcissistic chronicler of his own imagined youthful abuse, and Eric Pargac's unsocialized professional helpmeet, seem stuck somewhere between naturalism and high style, while Goodchild, whose Angela ought to act as our wisecracking eyes and ears, mutters and races through her lines with sullen intensity, as if unaware this was a comedy at all.

To be fair, it's a confusion the audience shares from its first exposure to Doug Newell's nervous techno score. Dan Jenkins' dim, flickering lighting, and the robotized patterns of urban pedestrians with which helmer Darin Anthony links scenes, promise more gritty reality (and less mirth) than the script delivers. Allison's dating nightmare is staged as a barfly zombie dance: Is this Michael Jackson's "Thriller," or a thriller? Either way, it's show-offy and inexpressive.

Above all, comedy needs to be up close and personal, and Jenkins does the production no favors by placing its major platforms so far upstage that one strains to hear and relate. Things perk up considerably whenever Anthony moves the action downstage.

Sets and lighting, Dan Jenkins; costumes, Christy M. Hauptman; original music and sound, Doug Newell; choreography, Jessica Hanna; stage manager, Sudro Brown II. Opened, reviewed Oct. 25, 2008; runs through Nov. 22. Running time: 1 HOUR, 35 MIN.