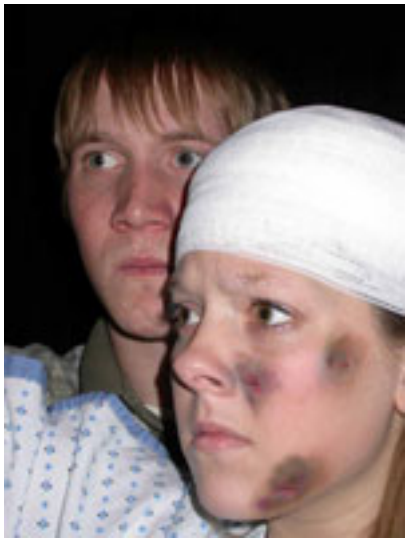
In the realm of educational theatre, the audience's enjoyment should always be secondary to what the *students* take from their theatrical experiences. So I certainly hope that 2006's productions were meaningful for the students in Augustana College's, St. Ambrose University's, and Black Hawk College's theatre programs, because this particular audience member had a *great* time at their shows.

Augustana's February presentation of *The Miser* set the tone for the school's whole output this year - four shows, no disappointments. But as much as I enjoyed the 2005-6 "Masks of Comedy" season, which included the funny *Black Comedy* and the *really* funny *The Real Inspector Hound*, I'm sort of relieved that it's over. I love laughing as much as anyone, but considering the superior talents of Augustana's student actors - and I'm delighted to see that Christine Barnes, Brian Bengtson, and Charlie Zamastil haven't graduated yet - I've been eager to see them do *more* than make me laugh.

Welcome to the 2006-7 season - themed "Issues of Our Times" - which opened with what seems to me the *perfect* sort of educational-production-slash-actor's-showcase: *Nickel & Dimed* , a serious, touching, *and* funny work that caters to the Augustana actors' gifts for character performance, much like 2005's *The Laramie Project* (still the best show I've seen at the school in the past decade). As a proud alumnus of the theatre department, I'm always thrilled to return for a new Augustana experience, and I can't wait for February's take on Tim Robbins' *Dead Man Walking* and David Hare's *Stuff Happens* in April, which - believe it or not - will give Augie's actors the chance to play George Bush, Tony Blair, Condoleeza Rice, and Sadaam Hussein. I'm in line for tickets *already* .

Across the river from Rock Island, Davenport's St. Ambrose has a much larger theatre to house its productions (the spacious Galvin Fine Arts Center versus Augustana's cozy Potter Hall), and its 2006 shows were suitably, lavishly scaled. *Much Ado About Nothing,* *The Threepenny*

Opera, and *Narnia* all boasted superior production design, and even Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind* had a grandeur that matched the characters' operatic emotions. The sheer bravado of these shows - That *Much Ado* set! Those *Narnia* costumes! - was inspiring, and the student crews (who, I'm ashamed to say, I consistently neglect to praise) that worked on their design deserve high praise.



Now if only the actors' performances were similarly majestic. With the exception of the marvelous *Lie of the Mind,* though, it seems that 2006's productions have overshadowed those performing them. That's a shame, considering that St. Ambrose appears to be *filled* with talents; when they're really rolling, Jack Kloppenborg, Claire Richards, and Sarah Catherine Ulloa are about as good as student actors get. This year, though, not all of the performers appeared confident about filling the Galvin space with passion and personality. (They'll have two more main-stage opportunities to do so this season, in February's *Fortinbras* and April's *Crème de Coco*.)

But it'll happen. That's what educational theatre is all about, of course - *learning*.

Which brings me to *Laundry & Bourbon* and *Lone Star* , which Black Hawk staged in November. To be quite frank, I was hesitant about seeing these one-act plays. I'd been to a couple of Black Hawk shows in the past, and while it was obvious that the student actors were having fun, it almost looked like they were having too
much
fun. The lines that made the audience laugh made several of the
actors
laugh, too - or at least noticeably grin - and the students didn't appear terribly interested in making the playwrights' intentions clear. I didn't question the shows' entertainment value; I questioned their
educational
value.

I am officially eating crow. *Laundry & Bourbon* was a sincere and completely enjoyable dialogue that provided meaty roles for a trio of really promising actresses, and the well-paced, satisfyingly rough-edged, and fall-down-funny *L*
one Star
was even
better. Lone Star's
Damian Cassini, Jeremy Kelly, and Nicholas Waldbusser are more than promising; they're damned
good
. (Despite my disappointment with Circa '21's production, I'm truly looking forward to Black Hawk's presentation of
The Ugly Duckling
in April.)

I can't, of course, ascertain whether the students involved with these one-acts *learned* about confidence and intent and timing from their theatre department, but they certainly
displayed
it, so kudos to Black Hawk for a nearly revelatory evening of theatre. And while I'm certain that
Laundry & Bourbon

and
Lone Star
meant even more to the students than to me, if they enjoyed their experience even
half
as much as I did, that's tuition money well spent.