

## Genesisius' Guilt: "The Comedian," at Lincoln Park through July 30

Written by Mike Schulz  
Tuesday, 25 July 2006 22:49

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A leading actor tortured by the inability to play a role he can't *feel*. A narcissistic starlet unashamedly flaunting her sexuality. A group of second bananas complaining about the sizes of their roles. A sweet-faced ingénue enduring the advances of an older sponsor. A clueless playwright convinced that his pedestrian dialogue is marvelous.

No, Genesisius Guild isn't tackling Terrence McNally or Woody Allen's *Bullets Over Broadway*, but rather Henri Gheon, whose play *The Comedian* opened at Lincoln Park this past Saturday.

Gheon's work concerns the Guild's mythological namesake Genesisius (played here by James J. Loula), the patron saint of performers, and it's filled with ethical and moral debate about the nature of acting, the theatre, and even religion. (Legend had it that, circa 300 A.D., the Roman Genesisius converted to Christianity during a performance for the emperor Diocletian, and was subsequently put to death.)

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Yet this production of *The Comedian*, well-staged by Patti Flaherty, is less successful with its weighty issues than with its blithely entertaining ones. The show may flirt with melancholy and even tragedy, but it's best enjoyed as a bitchy backstage comedy; even considering Genesisius' climactic martyrdom, this *Comedian* is less *St. Joan* than *All About Eve*.

Early in the play we are told, "The world passes by, but the theatre goes on forever." So, apparently, do theatrical stereotypes, and in its dealings with Genesisius' fellow thespians and those involved with their work, *The Comedian* presents a number of amusingly familiar characters for the Genesisius Guild ensemble to have fun with.

As the jealous, comically melodramatic Poppaea, Candice Gregg is radiantly vain. (During a rehearsal scene in Act II, Gregg's Poppaea gets into character by first acknowledging her anticipated, imaginary entrance applause.) Gregg delivers a sharp, funny caricature here; the actress was a one-scene show-stealer in last summer's *Another Part of the Forest* at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre, and I was delighted, in *The Comedian*, to see her in a more substantial role.

Michael Carron, Dee Canfield, and Anthony Johnson appear to be having a ball playing a trio of sarcastic thespians - Johnson's fizzy flamboyance, at times, suggests an early-Roman Mario Cantone - and Jewel McGhee is quietly touching as the debuting actress Albina; you feel protective of her, especially when Michael Miller's grabby Belisarius refuses to keep his mitts to himself.

Bryan Woods' Polydorus is every self-obsessed *artiste* you never wanted to meet; the playwright's shock at how his works are regarded as subversive - "Sub  
*ver*  
sive?!?" - provides the night's most surprising laugh. Grace Pheiffer attacks her minor role of the diva wannabe Valeria with gusto. And best of all, Mike King is on hand to fully humanize Diocletian. King, with his joyful performance energy and sterling interpretive skills, creates a flesh-and-blood character among the show's numerous "types," and his gentle heartbreak gives

*The Comedian*  
's climax some

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emotional resonance.

It's too bad the show doesn't have *more* emotional resonance. Yet while he never reads as less than sincere, Loula doesn't bring to Genesisius the *passion* the role requires. The actor is good when wrestling with Genesisius' crises of conscience; his confusion reads as completely genuine, and he's especially fine opposite Jonathan Gregoire, who gives a delicate, moving performance as Genesisius' brother, Felix - I had hoped for more than the one scene between them.

However, we don't quite feel the character's anguish, or his anger, or even that he's the greatest actor of his era. Loula's Genesisius, inwardly conflicted but externally inscrutable, doesn't seem much different at *The Comedian's* end as he was in the beginning, and the lack of a fiery, pained Genesisius deprives the show of its dramatic momentum. (I'd like to see what Mike King would do with the role, but then again, I'm hard-pressed to think of a role I *wouldn't* like to see King play.)

I wish I had been more caught up in the show's moral quandaries, but I certainly enjoyed *The Comedian's* lightheartedness, and found it almost comforting to consider how, in Gheon's vision, some theatrical stereotypes have endured for centuries.

In fact, my biggest complaint about Saturday night's performance had nothing to do with what I saw on stage, but what I endured *off-stage*; my friend and I were seated in front of two youths who nattered on - *loudly* - throughout the first act, and behind two restless children who couldn't find a seat to their liking. (By comparison, the dog sitting nearby was a model of decorum.) At one point in *The Comedian*, Dee Canfield's actress discusses her legendary performance as Medea, and laments that the only blight in her performance was "the audience being noisy and indifferent." Seems that some *audience* stereotypes have endured for centuries, too.

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*For more information, visit ( <http://www.genesius.org> ).*