

Half Crazy: "The Nonconformists Double Bill," at ComedySportz through September 30

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 26 September 2006 22:52

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My Verona Productions' *The Nonconformists Double Bill* is composed of two comedic, one-man performance pieces; Jason Conner and Adam Lewis star, arranged the material, and serve as the show's directors. In the show's first half, Conner enacts a half-dozen vignettes from bohemian performance artist Eric Bogosian's

Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll

; in the second,

It's Just a Ride: A Tribute to Bill Hicks

Lewis has fashioned a 40-minute monologue from the stand-up routines of the late comedian. And while the work is a local debut, I'm probably one of the few people in the area who initially caught the production when it opened out-of-town.

Conner and Lewis first presented this two-fer, in only slightly altered form, at Western Illinois University in 2003, and although I'm personal friends with both performers, I can't imagine that my enjoyment of 2003's *The Nonconformists Double Bill* (as it has been renamed for My Verona's presentation) was much more than

slightly

biased; both actors had - and have

always

had - sensational comic timing and terrific interpretive skills, and best of all, both seemed to

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really

love

Bogosian's and Hicks' work. Conner and Lewis attacked their comics' frequently hysterical, often explosive material not just with vigor, but with

empathy

, which grounded the laughs with a refreshing air of realism.

In the three-plus years since that WIU performance, Conner's and Lewis' talents haven't waned, and neither, it seems, has their affinity for the material; *The Nonconformists Double Bill* is a fine showcase for the pair's gifts. But for reasons that don't have much to do with acting ability, the presentation does feel a little lopsided, and the audience reactions on Saturday night appeared to back up that claim.

The *Sex, Drugs* act begins with Bogosian's monologue "Grace of God," in which Conner, entering from the back of the ComedySportz house, portrays a needy panhandler who matter-of-factly asks the audience for money. Yet the opening is a puzzler, and not because the audience is unaccustomed to being directly addressed, but because Conner doesn't look the least *bit* needy.

Conner performs all six Bogosian pieces in a basic black T-shirt and black jeans, but since the lights and Conner's character voices change with each new monologue, the wardrobe isn't what makes the sequence confusing, but rather the actor's *physicality*. Tall and thin, with a strong jaw and a spectacular mane of hair, Conner looks like the poster boy for physical health, and so - if you don't know *the material*, at any rate - it takes a while to glean that this introductory figure is supposed to be on the skids, and probably mentally disturbed. Conner's good looks and confident presence work against the character here, and unfortunately, not for the last time.

In the "Dirt" and "Bottleman" routines, Conner portrays very specific types of aggrieved, ranting New Yorkers, and his readings are vocally energetic and clever. But, again, we don't quite *buy* them, as Conner doesn't seem insane so much as he seems to be doing a fine job of

acting

insane. It takes quite some time, at the start of each new vignette, to get a mental picture of Conner's new character in our heads; the audience has to do perhaps too much work is determining what these comically wretched characters would look like if they

weren't

blessed with the actor's healthy presence.

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The best thing about Conner here is that he doesn't condescend to his characters - if anything, he gives them more dignity than they deserve. Yet based on the nervous half-laughs among the crowd, I'm guessing that many of the show's attendees didn't quite understand what was going on

, aside from a talented actor revealing his gifts for character comedy. (The travails of New Yorkers in the early '90s don't quite have the same impact with a Midwestern audience in the middle part of this decade.) Once Conner gets a rhythm going, he's fine and gets his laughs - especially when enacting an egocentric rock star on a talk show - but with too much time spent trying to determine whom we're dealing with in any given segment, and what relation the disassociated pieces have with one another, there's a lurching rhythm to the *Nonconformists'*

first half; it's a fun acting exercise, but little more.

No such problem, though, plagues *It's Just a Ride*, which has the benefit of being one uninterrupted monologue, allowing Lewis to sustain a rhythm for the entire piece. Stitching together material from nearly a dozen Hicks routines, Lewis, as Hicks, gets to rail against American drug policy, evangelical Christians, right-wing blowhards, and other elements of society that were major bees in Hicks' bonnet, and Lewis' anger and comic exasperation appear deeply felt - he continually works himself into a state of high dudgeon, and then works himself into a *higher* one. (Twice, the climaxes of Lewis' rants were met with applause.)

Pacing with pent-up frustration, and performing *outré* physical gestures to underline the gags - the things that Lewis does to a water bottle ... - the actor's performance energy never wanes, and by the end, the material has been shaped so that it actually *means*

something; unlike the Bogosian piece,

It's Just a Ride

feels like a full show, and not just a series of comedic highlights. The actors' talents are such that you wouldn't want to miss

either

half of

The Nonconformists Double Bill,

but I was delighted that they were performed in the order they are -

Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll

feels like a warm-up to a more satisfying

Ride

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For tickets, call (309)786-7733 extension 2.