

## Tales of the Cities: "Living Here," at the Nighswander Theatre through July 1

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 27 June 2007 02:21

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New Ground Theatre's *Living Here* is composed of five one-acts by local playwrights, each one set in the Quad Cities, and I applaud New Ground's decision to stage this showcase for local talent; the production as a whole is more than inspiring, it's *important*, and the efforts of these theatrical artisans deserve to be seen.

Which doesn't necessarily mean that I *liked* them all.

*Living Here's* first offering, Melissa McBain's *Yard Sale*, concerns the aging, formidable Emma (played by McBain herself), who relives iconic moments in her life before entering a nursing

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home, and it's a fascinating muddle. Emma's monologue takes unexpected detours and veers off onto wild tangents; stories of her past, present, and uncertain future continually dovetail, and comedic recollections about a sassy visitor from New Orleans and Emma shooting breast milk at a passing trucker (honestly) sit side-by-side with discussions of her mastectomy and her abandonment by her parents.

McBain's script, directed by Susan McDonald, is all over the map, and that's *exactly* as it should be.

*Sale*

ows a woman trying desperately

*not*

to have a nervous breakdown before her imposed "retirement," and Emma's ramblings wind up having extraordinary cumulative impact - the character needs to talk, and as much as possible, because it might be her last

*chance*

at conversation. This beautifully-rendered piece shrewdly clues us in to Emma's inner turmoil, and McBain is quite marvelous in it, effortlessly traversing between high comedy and nearly operatic grief. (Her reading of "Empty nest? Empty fucking

*universe*

!" is worthy of

*Lear*

, a work that Emma frequently references.) The play is amusing, edgy, and in the end, rather haunting.



You can feel Ann Boaden aiming for a similar result in *Living Here's* second one-act, *With Ah! Bright Wings*

, but more than a few elements get in the way. Boaden's piece concerns the fractured relationship between a mother (Boaden), who finds a message of peace in the vision of a swan, and her daughter (Susan McDonald), who finds Mom's newfound clearness-of-mind a threat. At

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least I  
*think*  
that's what was going on - at  
*Living Here*  
's opening-day performance, at least, it was all too easy to zone out on exactly  
*what*  
was being said.

To begin with, *Bright Wings*' continual name-dropping of area touchstones - Augustana College, the Midwest Writing Center, WVIK, the Rock Island Arsenal, Sunset Park, the Fort Armstrong... - proves incredibly distracting; you'd think *Living Here* was a contest, with the playwrights competing to see who could squeeze in the most Quad Cities references. (Boaden would win by a wide margin.) But its bigger problems are presentational: The cast, rounded out by Matt Moody, seems ill-at-ease and unsure of what effects they're going for (the actors seem barely to have *met*), and Chris Jansen's mostly motionless staging makes the work feel inert. As an author, Boaden flirts with a sad, touching theme - the crushing of the ethereal by the reality of familial responsibility - but unfortunately, it barely registers here.

Jansen does better with *Fudge!*, which she directed and scripted. *Much* better. This allegorical piece pokes vicious fun at local hypocrisy - our pride in area institutions that we support in theory but refuse to actually *patronize* - and it's a savagely funny, fiercely clever work. Yet while it's tempting to see *Fudge!* as theatrical sour grapes, what keeps it from being a comedic harangue is Jansen's refusal to make her put-upon heroine (Lora Adams) an innocent; the proprietor of a financially shaky fudge shop, she barks at a loyal customer (a sensational Jerry Wolking) for not being *more* loyal, and admits that she doesn't exactly frequent other area venues *herself*. There's a problem in this community, Jansen implies in *Fudge!*, and we're *all* a part of it.

This marvelous Act I closer is thematically rich, staged with vigor, and boasts some fabulously stylized performances. The supremely talented Pat and Patti Flaherty - the Pats Flaherty, if you

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will - are thrillingly, hilariously two-faced, and Adams, her giddy delirium giving way to abject humiliation, is absolutely priceless; after *Fudge!* and March's *Bad Dates*, she solidifies her status as 2007's poster girl for sublime, barely-concealed comic hysteria.



Tracy Pelzer-Timm and Jason Platt, meanwhile, are the best things about Julie McDonald's *And So to Bed*

. Following a 50-year marriage through four bedtime conversations - from honeymoon to golden anniversary - the actors form a sweet, completely believable rapport; under Susan McDonald's direction, their engaging naturalism helps disguise the fact that the show is completely void of conflict. And I mean *completely*

- the characters are happy at the beginning, happy in the middle, and happy at the end. (I waited in vain for a fifth scene - showing one of the characters alone in bed after a spouse's passing - which would've given the earlier scenes some context.) What we get in *And So to Bed*

is merely 20 minutes of contentment, and while that's pleasant and all, its relentless exposition and lack of emotional variety still left me a little hungry for a *play*

Finally, Jeffrey Shumaker's *About Earnest*, directed by Jansen, concerns a young man (Ryan Pitts) who's pathologically devoted to quoting Oscar Wilde's

*The Importance of Being Earnest*

, and for the life of me I don't know *what*

to make of it. Characters come and go, and swap allegiances, with no rhyme or reason. "Comic" bits - such as one involving the Tigress and Euphrates - recur and get more senseless as they continue. And what are we to make of the leading figure, who seems certifiably insane but is treated, instead, as an occasionally frustrating eccentric? (Pitts' performance certainly doesn't clarify matters; he wanders through the show sporting an empty grin, as if the character were

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mildly anesthetized.) The piece is nearly flabbergasting. I oftentimes felt like hiding my face, but was too stunned to turn away.

Yet while I may not understand what Shumaker was going for here, the piece does seem - vaguely - to be about the search for meaning, and that search is what makes *Living Here* worth a visit

*regardless*

of your opinions on its individual plays. (Generally, artists don't insist that you enjoy their works, merely that you

*see*

their works.) Bravo to New Ground for providing this forum, and I'm already jonesing for a sequel; I've attended more satisfying theatrical productions over the years, but rarely one that made me feel so proud to be living here.

*For tickets, call (563) 326-7529.*