Thank the theatre gods for Denise Yoder, as her presence livens up New Ground Theatre's production of *Anton in Show Business* every moment she's on stage. Portraying a handful of characters, Yoder really gets to showcase her range; whether she's playing a somewhat ditzy stage manager, or a race-conscious black woman directing a play-within-a-play, or a self-assured, bad-joke-telling, male underwriter, Yoder's sense of pace and comic timing are flawless. (Her director is a particular hoot, and her aggressively annoyed attitude as the stage manager T-Anne – who grows more and more impatient throughout the piece – is hysterical from beginning to end.)

It's unfortunate, though, that playwright Jane Martin's script doesn't stick with the tone set by T-Anne's opening monologue. Directed here by Wayne Hess, Martin's backstage comedy gets off to a great start – with T-Anne explaining the ladder on stage as an homage to Thornton Wilder – prior to her offering a "map" of theatre, with New York's Broadway the center of the universe, surrounded by off-Broadway, off-off-Broadway, regional theatre, and finally, "that place on the West Coast from which actors don't return." The description sets up the play as a biting satire of theatre, which – presuming the whole work is as funny as its opening monologue – means the audience is in for one hell of a time laughing along with theatrical inside jokes, abundant self-references, and self-deprecation.

Anton in Show Business, however, does not follow this track. Instead, Martin mixes in a plot involving three disparate actresses starring in a regional-theatre production of Anton Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*
in San Antonio. Cari Downing's Lisabette is a former third-grade teacher from Texas, who is finally fulfilling her dream of being a stage actress, and asks for God's forgiveness every time she (sort of) cusses. Lauren Vickers' Casey is the "Queen of off-off-Broadway," after starring in her 200th role without pay. And Jackie Madunic's Holly is a well-known television star, who is starring in a Chekhov play so Hollywood will take her seriously and she'll land a major movie role.

Yet while I liked the characters, I didn't really care whether or not their production would be a success. Downing, Vickers, and Madunic do a fine job of shading their actresses with simple sweetness, dismissive negativity, and domineering self-worth, respectively, but I kept wishing the play would return to the smart, acerbic assessment of modern theatre delivered in the opening monologue. There are bits of it here and there throughout the piece, particularly in

Yoder's multiple roles and James Driscoll's series of impressively portrayed, perfectly accented directors – one a flamingly gay Brit, and another a no-nonsense, theatrical, Russian genius. But Martin's storyline for the three actresses keeps taking more and more control of the script, and while touching at times – Casey describes her dealings with breast cancer, and Lisabette reveals that she's been raped (more than once) with poignant, "it's in the past" casualness – *Ant on in Show Business*
could stand to be a lot funnier.

The pacing of Hess' production doesn't help, as some scenes lose their punch due to the slower tempo in which lines are delivered, and their unnecessary pauses. This is particularly true in scenes involving Susan McPeters' Joby, who questions the play's proceedings in a style that's meant to be witty, but falls too far on the side of "sincere." McPeters' realistic portrayal tends to slow the production's pace, particularly when Joby questions why a male actor (played by Driscoll) is portraying a male director when the script specifically calls for a *woman* to play the male. (The bit is included as a statement on modern productions, where, as we're told, "80-percent of the roles in the American theatre are played by men, and 90-percent of the directors are men.") Her interactions are intended to interrupt the play, but McPeters' scenes could still be a bit tighter.

In contrast to McPeters' Joby, Molly McLaughlin's Kate, the play-within-a-play's producer, seems too consciously "acted." McLaughlin's effort shows, as her inflections are a little too practiced, and her physical movements are too deliberately broad. However, there's no sense of pretense in McLaughlin's multitude of minor characters. Her country singer, Ben – who is also starring in *The Three Sisters* – has just the right amount of twang in his voice and makes rather endearing connection with Madunic's Holly, and I also believed in McLaughlin's gay costume designer, who isn't overplayed in the slightest. McLaughlin, here, excels most when portraying people wholly different from herself.

It is Yoder, though who steals the show. Each and every one of her characters is a memorable one, and I wish Martin had written the other *Anton in Show Business* figures with as much humorous punch; based on how well they assumed the roles that were handed to them, I'm sure this cast could have handled a sharper comedy.

Anton in Show Business *runs at the Village Theatre (2113 East 11th Street, Village of East*

Davenport) through June 3, and tickets and information are available by calling (563)326-7529 or visiting NewGroundTheatre.org .