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Scott Community College's *Blue Sky Merchants* is an interesting idea that doesn't reach its potential, mainly due to its absence of subtlety. Local playwright and actor John R. Turner's play about a man (simply named Deskman, and played by Turner) who listens to, and then green-lights or rejects, ideas for television shows could be a poignant commentary on modern society's tastes in entertainment. Yet while Turner has a laudable knack for dialogue, Thursday's production left me with too-little question as to his intended message, mainly because his Deskman character clearly states the author's intent, rather than allowing the audience to decipher it.

Directed by Steve Flanigin, Scott's production is full of energy and is oftentimes quirky, especially with most of its cast members portraying people pitching TV-show ideas that are actually shows that were already made or, given the play's 2007 setting, will eventually be made. Jenna Burchett's dimwitted, Valley-Girl-without-the-attitude Betty (pitching PBS' *Upstairs, Downstairs*

remake) is a particular delight, while her T. Bob – a tomboy farm girl pitching Animal Planet's fishing show

Hillbilly Handfishin' –

is amusingly rude, spitting on Deskman's rug after her idea is rejected. Analisa Percuoco, whose range in last fall's

The Actor's Nightmare

at Scott was notable, doesn't get enough opportunities to show it here, but delivers short bursts of her talent in her overly peppy cheerleader Cherrie and her nuanced Cheryl, the latter involved in a love story that dominates much of the play's second half.

Written by Thom White
Monday, 15 April 2013 06:00



Sara Bolet's Julie, the love interest in the aforementioned romantic drama (the only one of *Blue Sky Merchants*

' pitches that is staged as well as verbalized), doesn't possess the moxie that the performer's Stage Manager did in

The Actor's Nightmare

, but she's shaped with a sincerity that's worthy of praise. And Amanda Dugan creates a focused, task-oriented figure as Deskman's secretary Jill, until the character noticeably softens with her involvement in the love saga.

The show's men get a chance to showcase their skills, as well. James Thames, who played the title character in *The Actor's Nightmare*, here offers an entertaining stoner named Jackson, voicing ideas that are an awful lot like

The X-Files

The Simpsons

Criminal Minds,
, and

. He also out-peps Percuoco's Cherrie as the cheerful Harry, and later tones things down with his touching, sad take on Sam, the man making the play's final, love-story pitch. Austin Stone impresses as Rutgers, a surfer-dude type touting a Tricky Dick documentary, and the high-pitched Bailey, whose genius idea involves Sherlock Holmes and Jack the Ripper on the *Titanic*

. (Bailey and Deskman do a reading of a scene from that show in which Stone lends a deeper voice, and an unexpected bravado, to his Holmes.) Isaac Scott, meanwhile, offers his usual "Play it big!" comedic acting style – a style that almost stole the shows in

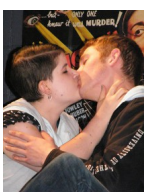
T

he Actor's Nightmare

and last spring's

Don't Talk to the Actors –

to the proceedings, especially when playing Deskman's boss Abernathy in a loud and (intentionally) monotonous tone of voice.



The scenic designer, unnamed in the program, also deserves a nod for his or her clever use of art in the office set. Deskman's back wall displays an eclectic mix of film and television posters, including *Mr. Moto's Gamble*, *NCIS*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Benny & Joon*, the 2004 *Da*

Pitch Imperfect: "Blue Sky Merchants," at Scott Community College through April 20

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wn of the Dead

remake, and, in a particularly amusing touch, two of Turner's actual plays –

Achilles' Heart

, and

Blue Sky Merchants

itself.

Yet while the cast entertains, Turner's play turns into too much of a statement on modern taste, as his Deskman – speaking directly to the audience in between story pitches – states his bewilderment at the success of shows he's rejected, and consequently turns *Blue Sky Merchants* into a

bit of a lecture. Throughout his one-act, Turner shares his knowledge that recent (and not-so-recent) popular television programs are just copies of

previous

popular television shows (

Downton Abbey

is

Upstairs, Downstairs

,

The X-Files

is the 1960s sci-fi series

The Invaders

) and pontificates on their lack of originality, even calling members of modern society zombies to explain why zombie films and shows such as

The Walking Dead

are so popular. Perhaps Turner is making a point that's more subtle and touching than the one I detected, and I missed his actual intended message. (I am, after all, a big

fan

of

The X-Files

and

The Walking Dead

.) But either way, his concept, while a clever one, could still use refinement, which would render his play even more relevant and thought-provoking.

Blue Sky Merchants runs at Scott Community College's Student Life Center (500 Belmont Road, Room 2400 through door 5, Bettendorf) through April 20, and more information is available by e-mailing director Steve Flanigin at sflanigin@eicc.edu.