

First Look 2011

MURDERER'S ROW
Smallwood takes a liking to Arenas.



Man in Love By Christina Anderson. Dir. Robert O'Hara. With ensemble cast. 1hr 25mins; no intermission.



Oblivion By Carly Mensch. Dir. Matt Miller. With Fiona Robert, Marc Grapey, Elizabeth Rich. 1hr 55mins; one intermission.



Want By Zayd Dohrn. Dir. Kimberly Senior. With Audrey Francis, Janelle Kroll, Mark L. Montgomery, Kendra Thulin, Mick Weber. 1hr 10mins; no intermission.

A piercing sense of desire permeates the three intriguing new works receiving developmental productions as part of Steppenwolf's annual First Look Repertory. This desire takes different forms: the search for faith and belonging in Carly Mensch's *Oblivion*, the multifarious longings of the denizens of Christina Anderson's *Man in Love* or the desire for an end to desire that's expressed by the recovering addicts of Zayd Dohrn's *Want*.

Anderson establishes in the opening moments of the moody, atmospheric *Man in Love* which of her characters is the serial killer the rest are buzzing about in an unnamed Depression-era metropolis. What she doesn't establish until much, much later is how the various strands of her story might relate to one another.

In the mostly black segment of the city known as the Zoo, the killer, Paul Pare (a magnetically creepy Namir Smallwood), socializes politely with his neighbors, agoraphobic shut-in Darlynn (Alana Arenas) and white transvestite Bernice (Ryan Lanning). Meanwhile, in the poor white neighborhood called the Spread, soulful Leigh (Tim Frank) pines after

nursing student Hazel (Claire Wellin), while Leigh's union buddy Walker (Keith D. Gallagher), unable to find work, looks for somewhere to take out his frustrations. It's all eminently watchable, but might be too sprawling for its 85 minutes; the ambiguous ending feels unsatisfying.

Dohrn's *Want* depicts an offbeat recovery group disrupted by a new arrival. Alpha dog David (Mark L. Montgomery), skittish Julia (Audrey Francis), maternal Lee (Kendra Thulin) and eager-to-please Henry (Mick Weber) share an austere beach house where they support one another through unconventional tough-love methods developed by David, who disparages AA for treating recovery as a religion.

When a young addict shows up on their doorstep, the group takes her in on a trial basis. Though Marley (Janelle Kroll, masterfully manipulative) at first seems an agent of chaos, she warms to the house's rules—and in so doing, exposes the ways the housemates have been deceiving themselves. In Kimberly Senior's well-cast production, Dohrn seems to be asking when self-denial becomes self-defeating.

Oblivion is, on its face, the most dishearteningly traditional play on the bill: Most of its action takes place in the apartment of upper-middle-class white NPR-liberal New York intellectuals. But Mensch's play is also the most polished of the set, with its fair share of surprises. Dixon (Marc Grapey) and Pam (Elizabeth Rich) are archetypes of permissive parenting. They drink wine and smoke pot and quote Nietzsche in conversation with 16-year-old daughter Julie (Fiona Robert).

But it's Julie's newfound interest in religion—and not just any religion, but traditional Christianity—that finds the edge of Pam's tolerance. Mensch resists pat answers about the search for faith and place as she peels back layer upon layer of her story, with some stealth attacks. All four performances (including the charming Rammel M. Chan as Julie's oddball best friend) are steeped in nuance. —Kris Vire

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