

## Kokkola



**Akvavit Theatre** (see Fringe & storefront). By Leea Klemola. Dir. Chad Eric Bergman. With ensemble cast. 2hrs 30mins; one intermission.

It's fitting that Leea Klemola's affronting, truly jaw-dropping "arctic tragedy of darkly comic proportions" begins and ends with a discussion about humiliation. Over the production's two and a half hours, its desperately unhappy characters spend an unflattering amount of time in their skivvies, screech and cry out family confessions, down enough vodka to kill the sea animals they turn into (don't ask) and slap the living shit out of each other—and not in the theater-school-stage-combat sense. I saw handprints. Director Chad Eric Bergman's Akvavit Theatre production easily marks one of the most unsettling, head-scratching, cringe-inducing shows I've seen in years.

God bless him for it.

Named after a Finnish town, Klemola's 2004 play follows isolated, begrudgingly close-knit Nordic community members' struggle to deal with each other and their own out-of-reach longings in a fatalistic,



**ARCTIC DRUNKIES**  
Kokkola's residents belly up to the bar.

disinterested world. It's challenging material, if partially overstuffed and at times totally mystifying, but it's made more empathetic by Bergman's game cast, led by Joshua Harris as an alcoholic bus driver set on preserving his extended family's well-being whether they appreciate it or not. For

all the piece's bleary viciousness, set against an affecting, atmospheric set by Bergman and Sarah Nelson with lighting design by Maggie Fullilove-Nugent, the ensemble finds some compassion in the cold—which, as Klemola hints, is where it actually matters.—*Dan Jakes*

## Salt of the Earth



**COAL COMFORT**  
Rob Glidden and Bartholomew take a spin.



**Ka-Tet Theatre** (see Fringe & storefront). By John Godber. Dir. Thomas Murray. With ensemble cast. 2hrs; one intermission.

It takes commitment to embody a character over four decades. By the end of *Salt of the Earth*, both cast and audience have a lived-in comfort with the West Yorkshire coal-mining family at the center of the action, thanks to the determination of the generally strong ensemble.

Playwright John Godber grew up in Yorkshire himself, and his dialogue is taut and affecting even when a married couple bicker for the sake of bickering or a teenaged lover grunts a come-on.

A spare set and costume design belie the production's complexity. We see the characters age from 1947 to 1988—growing up, falling in love, facing crisis—mainly through subtly maturing speech and body language. As May, the wife of clownish miner Harry, Kathryn Bartholomew is a standout; what softness she had in her

youth seems to be blasted out by middle age, leaving only coal dust, suspicion and resentment. Equally strong, Joshua Katzker is onstage all too briefly; he gives the part of Harry's pal Roy sincerity and passion.

One unfortunate oversight: While the joy and community of dancing are central threads of the characters' lives, the dance steps aren't convincing. The actors have hewed their Yorkshire accents with rare dedication; their foxtrot and jitterbug could use a bit of the same polish.—*Emily Gordon*

## A Scent of Flowers

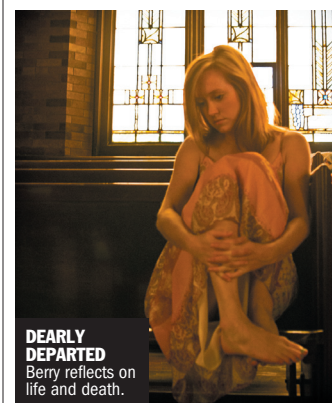


**BackStage Theatre Company** (see Fringe & storefront). By James Saunders. Dir. Matthew Reeder. With ensemble cast. 2hrs 35mins; two intermissions.

Director Matthew Reeder makes a compelling case in a program note for the legacy of the late James Saunders. The British playwright of the 1950s and '60s was described in *The Guardian's* 2004 obituary as a peer of Harold Pinter and a major influence on Tom Stoppard, but he never developed the international recognition enjoyed by those writers. BackStage is billing its production of Saunders's *A Scent of Flowers*, first produced in 1964 with a cast featuring a young Ian McKellen, as the Midwest premiere.

If only Reeder's production made a similarly persuasive case onstage. Saunders's atmospheric play centers on the recently deceased Zoe (Jess Berry), a delicate young girl who, it soon becomes clear, has taken her own life. Her possible motives are revealed over three acts, as Zoe's family members—a loving, perhaps in-love stepbrother (Patrick De Nicola), a cold but caring stepmother (Mary Anne Bowman), an ineffective father (Ron Butts) and a doting bachelor uncle (Michael Pacas)—mourn her passing. They also address her directly, as Zoe seems to drift in and out of physical presence at the funeral parlor, church and grave site. (Act III echoes *Our Town*, with Zoe watching her own burial.)

As his characters float dreamily through scenes in the present, in flashback and in murky limbos in between, Saunders's professed disdain for convention reads more like a lack of discipline. And his pop psychology, casting Zoe as a child made fragile by divorce, just feels dated. Despite committed work by Berry, with strong support from De Nicola and Pacas, I'd put Saunders back on the shelf.—*Kris Vire*



**DEARLY DEPARTED**  
Berry reflects on life and death.