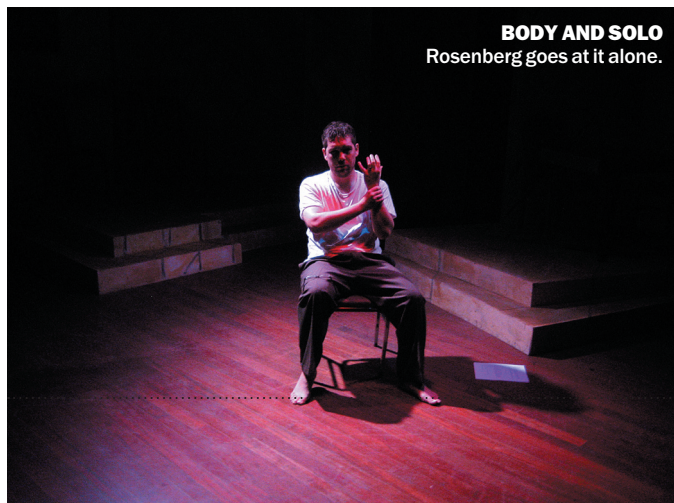


The Other Side of the Elephant



★★★★★
Curious Theatre Branch at Prop Thtr (see Fringe & storefront). By Matthew Wilson, Beau O' Reilly, Scott T. Barsotti, Shawn Reddy, Jenny Magnus, Jayita Bhattacharya, Matt Rieger, Bryn Magnus, Matt Test. Dirs. Adam Rosenberg, Stefan Brun, Jeffrey Bivens, Megan Larmer, writers and ensemble. With ensemble casts.

This collection of short works, assembled in honor of the Curious Theatre Branch's 20th birthday, stacks a totem pole on top of a mile marker; a whopping nine plays by nine writers are showcased over three nights to commemorate two decades of fringe. The pieces run the gamut, from vignette to monologue to performance-art fugue, but share

in the exaltation of language as a self-sufficient narrative engine that's always been this company's hallmark. Perhaps accidentally, they also speak to one another, echoing the elliptical synergy that's kept the Curious collective rolling all these years.

Company founders O'Reilly and the Magnuses are naturally well-represented, their contributions split among the three nights. Of these, O'Reilly's "One Boppa" is the standout, a supple bit of familial comedy executed with a feather-light touch. (Much credit is also due here to director Rosenberg and superlative "sisters" Kat McJimsey, Kathleen Powers and Teresa Weed.) Bryn Magnus's domestic scene is slighter but sound, and old pros Guy Massey and Vicki Walden are a pleasure to watch. Jenny Magnus's riskier, more ambitious piece, a jagged collage circling issues of anatomical transformation, pays the price experimentation sometimes must; never really coming into focus, the play's shock ending registers only a profound "huh?"

The remaining pieces loosely represent the subsequent generation of Curious writers. Reddy's "The

Great Galvani," a glittering historical riff, nestles a new depth of feeling between the heady association and sarcastic fury that are his forte. H.B. Ward is arresting in the title role, but his monologue is just one such performance on hand: Bivens knocks Wilson's hilarious trifle "Poor Guy" out of the park, and writer-performer Rieger's pseudo-wigger confessional, "A Part of the Game," had an inveterate eye-roller at white-boy urban affectation (yours truly) hanging on every word.

Back on the perf-art front, Barsotti's (fiercely intelligent) and Bhattacharya's (fiercely oblique) pieces are more disjointed and less successful. But Test's "A Minor Loss of Fidelity," a seamless joining of feverish, gorgeous dialogue, movement and song to high-absurdist blazonry, is a revelation. As designed, directed (by Larmer) and especially performed (by Michelle Dahlenburg, Jess Russell and Walden), Test's full-throttle reverie is an aesthetic ambush that shoots for absolutely nothing, blindfolded, while roller-skating, and yet somehow scores a bull's-eye.—BN

Lipstick Traces

★★★★★
Pavement Group at AV-aerie (see Fringe & storefront). By Greil Marcus. Adapted by Kirk Lynn. Conceived by Shawn Sides. Dir. David Perez. With ensemble cast.

The overlap in the Venn diagram of punk-rock fans and storefront theatergoers might be smallish, but if you're in the intersection, *Lipstick Traces* will be right up your alley. In fact, you have to enter from the alley, but what's more punk rock than an underground show that tracks the history of rebellion?

Very loosely adapted from Marcus's book by the Rude Mechs

troupe of Austin, Texas, *Lipstick* traces similarities among three 20th-century cultural movements: Dada, the WWI-inspired anti-art; the midcentury Paris intellectuals behind Lettrism and Situationism; and the rise of punk rock, as seen through the lens of the Sex Pistols.

Guided by the Pistols' smarmy manager Malcolm McLaren (Zach Gonzalez-Landis) and Dr. Narrator (Heidi Koling)—she has a Ph.D. in narrating—*Lipstick* pinballs around its subjects, daring us to keep up. The performance-as-lecture becomes a tug of war between McLaren's commercial cynicism and Dr. Narrator's attempts at academic

objectivity—with Johnny Rotten (Joey Steakley) standing in the middle, scissors to the rope.

Perez's smart direction, happily free of artifice, makes this one of the happiest marriages of rock and theater we've seen. He's helped by killer design achievements, both high-tech (Paul Elliott's video work) and low (David Hyman's kick-ass costumes), as well as hard-hitting performances led by Gonzalez-Landis and Koling, who has a priceless meltdown as she attempts to pin down chaos. As Dr. Narrator has to learn, rebellion won't go down without a fight.—KV



Doubt

★★★★★
Redtwist Theatre (see Resident companies). By John Patrick Shanley. Dir. Greg Kolack. With Jan Ellen Graves, C. Sean Piereman.

Shanley's pitch-perfect pederastic parable leaves no moral stone unturned. The play traces Sister Aloysius Beauvier's unrelenting attempts to rid her Bronx middle school of young hotshot Father Flynn, a priest she suspects molested the sole black student in her purebred

Irish and Italian institution. Vexing motives and thorny questions abound: What combination of groundless mistrust and boundless maternalism drives this icy matron to suspect the priest? What interplay of shrewd class-consciousness and dotting maternal instinct prevents the boy's mother from supporting Aloysius's calls for Flynn's removal? And did Father Flynn actually do it? Shanley's taut morality tale refuses to skim on layers of character insight as it drives its intricate, even

contradictory messages home.

Redtwist's actors barrel through their lines with a rapid confidence fit for a far preachier, simpler play. Piereman as Father Flynn emotes with a painted-on, teacherly gusto; this smarmy appeal might work if it ever dissolved into something more sincere. The actor's speed-demon sermons and zippy skirmishes barely clue us in on the conflicted desires driving Flynn's undoubtedly mysterious, allegedly illegal behavior. Graves hits appropriately

frigid notes as Sister Aloysius, but likewise breezes over her character's ethically dense monologues to usher the audience to the fable's instructive ending.

Shanley's faultless script holds its own among actors whose hurried but committed portrayals capture at least several of *Doubt's* numerous themes. If only Redtwist's even production afforded the audience a little more time for reflection, a slightly less hasty reading and a little more room for doubt.—Christopher Shea