

Critics' Forum

Theater

Bogosian Double-Play

By Aram Kouyoumdjian

To describe a play as “talky” seems rather silly; dialogue, after all, serves as a foundation for drama. Eric Bogosian’s plays, however, are “talky.” They don’t unfold as intricate narratives. They don’t have much plot. Bogosian is far less interested in what his characters have to do than in what they have to say. In fact, the *need* to talk, to rant, to spew words with ferocity often defines the figures who populate Bogosian’s solo performance works.

The preoccupation with talk spills over into Bogosian’s full-cast plays, two of which were revived in recent Los Angeles productions. The teens and twenty-somethings of “subUrbia” have little to do *but* talk, as they loiter outside a convenience store. And words are tantamount to currency in the aptly-named “Talk Radio.”

By all indications, the brief incarnation of “subUrbia” at the Hollywood Fight Club should have been a disaster. The venue itself, located in a strip mall, boasts a playing area for which “stage” is too strong a word. At the matinee I attended, the sun shining through the storefront windows asserted its own “lighting design” on a set that could not have cost more than a latte.

Unexpectedly enough, the show worked. Sort of. Well, it worked as much as it could have in the face of such impediments. It worked mostly because of a committed cast that generated honest and energetic performances to offset some of this middling production’s shortcomings.

The play’s minimal plot finds its young suburbanites in front of a 7-Eleven, their usual hangout, when a former friend from high school, who has found fame as a rock star, returns for a visit. This auspicious reunion offers potentially life-altering choices for the locals. After all, dreams are still alive for some of them, like the aspiring artist Sooze (Stacy Michelle Gold), even if they’ve proven paralyzing for the idealistic Jeff (Beau Hirshfield) or disillusioning for the jaded Tim (Jeremy Rodriguez).

For the most part, Bogosian’s script sounds authentic in recreating the language of youth (although its slips are all-too-painful to the ear). The language of youth, however, is fickle and ever-changing, so a number of references in “subUrbia” had been updated for this production in order to keep the text, now a dozen years old, relevant.

Fortunately, the script had an ally in director Frank Krueger, who achieved a sense of urgency whenever necessary (the “roughhousing” among the characters turned quite physical) but knew to allow quieter sequences to unfold at the appropriate pace. Still, he never missed the play’s funnier elements (drawing a hilarious, albeit over-the-top, performance from Brad Robinson). One only wished he were better equipped with the resources to have production values consistent with his vision.

Crisp production values were on full display in the Gangbusters Theatre Company's staging of "Talk Radio," which had a limited run at Theatre 68 in Hollywood. This early play from Bogosian's canon, virtually devoid of plot, dramatizes an hour from the talk show of controversial (and fictional) shock jock Barry Champlain the night before his show is to go national. Scenic designer Danny Cistone's meticulous replica of a broadcast studio provided the perfect setting in which Champlain, winningly portrayed by Christian Levatino, would expose his callers' demons while struggling with his own.

In a strong ensemble, Jonathan Burbridge stood out as Champlain's call screener, perfectly balancing Levatino's intensity with a casual portrayal punctuated by both laughs and poignancy. Equally worthy of mention was Matt Mann, riotous in his scene-stealing turn as a drugged-out fan who finagles his way onto Champlain's show.

The play, however, belonged to Levatino, who constructed a complex character in Champlain, even as he unleashed Bogosian's words with all their intended fury. In Levatino's hands, Champlain's rage was explosive and profane, his introspection solemn and quiet. One could not help being struck by the depth of his performance, which revolved, for significant stretches of time, around a microphone. But Levatino practically gave life to this inanimate object in developing an organic, even visceral, interaction with "callers" who never appeared onstage.

Director Leon Shanglebee confidently helmed the edgy work, managing to keep focus where the script meandered. Even in its deviations, however, Bogosian's raw, intense, and kinetic writing always maintained tension and commanded attention.

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Aram Kouyoumdjian is the winner of Elly Awards for both playwriting ("The Farewells") and directing ("Three Hotels"). His performance piece, "Protest," was recently staged at the Finborough Theatre in London.

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