

Mind warp

Funny

By Shawn B. Hirabayashi
Directed by Julie Hamberg
Review by Doug DeVita

Vital Theatre Company
 432 West 42nd Street, 3rd fl. (592-0129)
 Equity showcase (closes Oct. 6)

There is a scene late in the film *All About Eve* when Celeste Holm, her character having been blackmailed by the scheming Eve of the title, finds out that her angst has been for naught and collapses in a fit of hysterical laughter. When asked what is so funny, she gasps "Nothing. Everything. Everything is so funny."

That worldly viewpoint to the absurdities of life infuses Shawn B. Hirabayashi's *Funny*, a surreal black comedy that received a terrific production at Vital Theatre under the crisply inventive direction of Julie Hamberg.

Funny is not laugh-out-loud, fall-on-the-floor, gasping-for-breath funny. Matters actually become quite serious as it examines the repercussions for Alice, Delia, and Giovanni, three inseparable friends, when Alice decides to hire a hit man to get Delia out of her life. When the hit man, the self-named Ex, turns out to be a conscience-stricken hired gun who hears the voice of a comatose woman he has never met, buffs his well-manicured nails in stressful moments, and needs to know the motives behind a hit before he can execute it, *Funny* starts to play fast and loose with logic, time, and geography as it journeys through the psyches of some very bizarre but appealing human beings. At times it is slow-moving, at times it is wildly improbable, at times it borders on the pretentious. But Hirabayashi makes his points with soft hammer-blows of dreamlike intensity; the overall effect is quite impressive, and yes, funny.

Hamberg directed with an intensity perfectly in tune with Hirabayashi's view -- by occasionally allowing the pace to slow down, she savored moments of salient information and made magic with just the simplest of strokes. She also coaxed terrific performances from the enormously appealing cast. As the rattled Alice, *Ivanna Cullinan* struck all the right notes as she searched for the meaning of her life -- she was particularly effective in the play's later moments, stubbornly clinging to her vision against all odds. As the perplexed Delia, *Jacqueline Mazzarella* managed to be simultaneously subtle and blatant: it was understandable just why Alice would want to get rid of her, but how could anyone want to harm such a lovable, if needy, friend? *Eric Kever Ryle* was charm personified as Giovanni -- his comic timing was superb, yet he never neglected the darker undercurrents that fuel both his character and the play. Ex, the most complex role (and one that could have toppled everything if played over-the-top), was given a marvelously detailed characterization by *Jeremy Brisiel*; complex yet effortlessly breezy, his ruggedly fey performance was a masterstroke of understated but intelligent choices. Just watching him as he gave himself a manicure while carrying on a conversation with the voice in his head was a moment of convulsive, theatrical joy.

Miranda Hardy's attractive, soft-green NYC apartment set fit the first act with precision but didn't quite work for the second act's Papua, New Guinea locale, even though dressed with a profusion of vines and other bits of flora and fauna. *Aaron Spivey's* leafy green and amber lighting helped, however, as did *Arthur Shettle's* constant but unobtrusive sound effects. *Sarah Iams* provided appropriately run-of-the-mill costumes whose details grew in complexity as the play progressed.

If *Funny* is not a perfect work (it certainly is not entertainment for the masses), it is an intelligent, thought-provoking piece of writing that has been given an intelligent, thought-provoking production. The laughs may be more of the cerebral than guffaw variety, but they do give the play a deeper, more resonant theatrical edge. Somehow nothing, and yet everything, is funny. Like life.

Box Score: (ratings from 0 to 2)

Writing: 2
 Directing: 2
 Acting: 2
 Sets: 1
 Costumes: 1
 Lighting/Sound: 2

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