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Vignettes for the Apocalypse: 2008

nytheatre.com review by Martin Denton
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End Times Productions is presenting a compact festival of a dozen and a half original short plays, in six different programs, at their new space Underground at the Gene Frankel Theatre. As the umbrella title suggests, these are ostensibly pieces about the (looming?) end of the world; the pre-show announcement about turning off cell phones rather wittily sets the tone. I caught two of the groupings (for a total of six plays) and though the theme is not necessarily adhered to throughout, the overall quality of the presentation is pretty good for this kind of thing. And at least one of the pieces I saw ranks as very good: Paul Cohen's *The Accommodation* (interestingly, the second excellent new play of his that I've seen this week; the other is [Cherubina](#)) is great fun, combining two familiar genres—the crime caper and the poking-fun-at-pretentious-art parody—into a seamless, savvy whole.

Let me begin, then, with *The Accommodation*, which is the final item in Group 1 of *Vignettes for the Apocalypse 2008*. It starts with the line "It's set inside Golda Meir's vagina"—surely a can't-miss opening if ever there was one. The "it" being referred to is a very arty one-woman play about politics and empowerment and a whole mess of other Important Stuff, which is being presented in a 35-seat off-off-Broadway theatre that has the ill fortune to be located next door to a jewelry store that three unlikely criminals—Sarah (the bomb expert), Mike (responsible for diverting the alarm company), and Doug (who will be on the scene at the theatre)—are planning to burglarize. I'd be a criminal myself to reveal too much more about this charmer of a comedy. Cohen's sense of the absurd is perfectly balanced by director Kristin Skye Hoffman's assured sense of timing. The piece is also blessed with a quartet of excellent performances, anchored by Hoffman herself as the eminently pragmatic Sarah, with Lea McKenna-Garcia as the serious-yet-flaky actress/playwright Muriel, and Jake Paque and Kurt Rodeghiero as Mike and Doug. All four are superb. This play deserves a life beyond this festival, and on the basis of the two Cohen shows I've seen in the past three days, he's becoming a playwright to keep an eye on.

The other two items in Group 1 are *A View Unassisted* by Craig Abernathy and *Old Faithful* by Ian Grody. The former adheres to the festival's theme, imagining a future in which something that we take for granted becomes the stuff of illicit, furtive dealings. The central idea of this piece is a knockout, but perhaps not enough to sustain even the 10 or 12 minutes of this play. Rebecca Lovett and Tana Sarnt are effective under Jeremy Pape's direction. The latter is an intriguing tale of blackmail between two unexpected parties (the victim is a rabbi, the blackmailer is one of his congregants, a painter trying to quit his three day jobs). Alessandro Colla is fine as the painter, but Paul Krassner and Monika Schneider are unconvincing as the rabbi and his secretary. Laurie Rae Waugh is the director.

Group 2 contains a piece that packs some emotional wallop: *The Title Fight*, by Ian August, pits two brothers against one another to play out the final rounds of a competitive battle that's been imposed on them by a careless father almost literally since they could walk. Although this piece reminded me a lot of Daniel MacIvor's *Never Swim Alone*, it is nevertheless a powerful drama. Colla again does effective work as the elder brother, who got to go to college, while Patrick McDaniel matches him as the younger sibling, who learned to make his way in the world with his fists. Jimmy Blackman plays their spectral Dad, who referees the bout. Tony Macy-Perez directs; the staging is good, but perhaps too scarily authentic in terms of the fight choreography (to the point where I worried for the safety of the actors).

The first play in Group 2 is Elizabeth C. Bachner's *Pretty, Pretty*, which I confess I found a bit hard to follow. It's about a former actress who is looking back at her life choices with a mix of regret and melancholy, but the other characters on stage (who include a Russian/Italian supermodel and her rock star boyfriend) occasionally intrude as she confides in the audience, which for me was distracting. The last play on this bill is another one that bows to the apocalyptic, in this case with the supremely funny idea of zombie telemarketers. However, playwright Brett Hursey seems unsure of the best way to exploit this terrific premise, and unfortunately this piece ultimately flounders.

I left the double-header feeling well-satisfied, finding something worthwhile to take from just about each of the entries in the evening—and in a couple of cases, much more than that. End Times is offering a grittier-than-usual version of the familiar one-act compendium, and they've uncovered some noteworthy talents who deserve to be seen and heard.

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