



LABUTE'S BEST: (L to R) Jeff Binder, Mando Alvarado, and James Chen in a scene from 'The New Testament' by Neil LaBute, directed by Dolores Rice. Photo: Rahav Segev

Theater Review

Summer Shorts 5: Series A: *LaBute's The New Testament* is highlight

SUMMER SHORTS 5: SERIES A

FESTIVAL OF NEW AMERICAN PLAYS

Plays by Ruby Rae Spiegel, Christopher Durang, Alexander Dinelaris, & Neil LaBute

Through September 3, 2011

59East59 Theaters

59 East 59th Street, (212-279-4200)

www.59.e59.org

By Scott Harrah

Summer Shorts 5: Series A contains four plays from both emerging and established playwrights. Of the four plays, Neil LaBute's *The New Testament* is, by far, the most outstanding, while newcomer Ruby Rae Spiegel and Alexander Dinelaris show promise. The play by veteran Christopher Durang is the most disappointing. There is no thematic thread amongst the four shows other than all are, well, short.

Following is a rundown of the four plays; in the sequential order that they are shown.

CARRIE & FRANCINE

By Ruby Rae Spiegel

Directed by Laura Barnett

Winner of Stephen Sondheim's Young Playwright's Inc Award, *Carrie & Francine* is the first produced play by 17-year-old playwright Ruby Rae Spiegel, a 2011 graduate of St. Ann's in Brooklyn. Two teenage girls (Louise Sullivan and Lydia Weintraub) are shown doing everything from indulging in bulimia to talking about sex as they prepare to attend a friend's bar mitzvah.

This is an ambitious drama, particularly from such a young playwright, but it is far too undeveloped. The actions of the teenage girls are quite disturbing, but the story ultimately seems pointless, as there is no real resolution.

TRIPLE TROUBLE WITH LOVE

Written and directed by Christopher Durang

The weakest play in *Summer Shorts 5: Series A* is surprisingly from the most seasoned playwright, Christopher Durang.

Three characters (Aidan Sullivan, Nick Choksi, and Beth Hoyt) talk about their relationship troubles in three respective monologues that are sometimes funny, but most fail to shed much light on the characters. One character, Samantha/Anne (Sullivan), talks about dating unattractive men or "hobbits" to make herself feel better. Nick Choksi plays Gary, the second character, who discusses why they broke up. The third character, Jackie (Hoyt), with no real connection to the other two, speaks of marrying a meth addict, then a heroin addict, and makes little sense.

Overall, this short play places too much emphasis on cheap laughs about people with substance abuse and self-esteem problems instead of giving audiences meaningful material that actually says something worthwhile about modern love.

IN THIS, OUR TIME...

By Alexander Dinelaris

Directed by J.J. Kandel

Alexander Dinelaris's *In This, Our Time...* starts out the far superior second act of *Summer Shorts 5: Series A* with this completely absorbing drama about a teenage girl, Jules (Erin Darke), who has recently split with her boyfriend and is trying to make sense of it. She spills the details to her mother's understanding boyfriend, Billy (Ted Koch), a middle-aged man who has love problems of his own.

Meanwhile, the girl's mother, Maggie (Maryann Towne), is out at a bar, planning an evening of sex with Mike (Ryan Tramont), a man she met on a Web site.

There are some superb performances here, particularly from Miss Darke and Mr. Koch, but there is way too much going on here for a simple half-hour drama. *In This, Our Time...* would

make a nice framework for a longer, more detailed play because the characters are complex and the playwright's dialogue is so intelligent and crisp.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

By Neil LaBute

Directed by Dolores Rice

The best play of *Summer Shorts 5: Series A* is, by far, this edgy story about a controversial subject: colorblind casting in the theater.

Jeff Binder is a playwright who has just penned an epic about Jesus Christ. He sits in a restaurant with his producer (Mando Alvarado) as they both try to negotiate with an Asian actor (James Chen) and attempt to convince him why he is not right for the part of the Son of God.

Mr. LaBute makes many potent statements about this sensitive topic, and that is not easy to do in this era of political correctness, but he also gives equal time to both sides of the issue. To divulge anything else would spoil the story. Mr. Binder is wonderfully abrasive and caustic as the playwright, but Mr. Chen is more than an eloquent match for the man's wits. Mr. Alvarado, as the producer, is thoroughly convincing. *The New Testament* is perhaps the best thing yet from the prolific Neil LaBute, author of such plays as Broadway's *Reasons to Be Pretty* and Off-Broadway's *Fat Pig*, *Wrecks*, and *In a Dark Dark House*.

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