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REVIEWS

## Play

Dan Bacalzo | New York City | June 08, 2004





Chad Beckim and Glenn Cruz in *Play*

(Photo © Robert O'Hara)

It was a promising idea:

Playwright/director Robert O'Hara invited five other playwrights to join him in an experimental collaborative theater project. The writers -- Chay Yew, Kia Corthron, Edwin Sanchez, Keith Josef Adkins, and Tracey Scott Wilson -- all said "yes." Unfortunately, the end result, titled simply *Play*, is deeply flawed and not all that entertaining.

Three of the writers involved (Yew, Corthron, and O'Hara) took part in a similar project a few years ago called *The Square*, conceived by Yew and director Lisa Peterson. But while that work brought together 16 playwrights for one evening-length work, it was only loosely unified by theme (the Asian-American experience) and location (a public square in NYC's Chinatown).

O'Hara's vision was to have one evolving storyline and a consistent cast of characters. He set out a few rules, which he shares with the audience in the program notes:

1. If you choose to introduce a new character, you must only introduce one.
2. You must use at least one character from any previous section.
3. You must further the story along in an adventurous manner.
4. You must complete your section in about 10 pages.

It's to be expected that each section of *Play* has a different style but, aside from that, the work is unevenly directed and the different segments work uneasily with each other at best. Certain story elements are carried over from section to section while other plot developments are simply dropped. As a director, O'Hara fails to clarify the action. In one scene, for example, a character supposedly drenches himself and his lover's bed with gasoline. Performed in mime with no props (not even an empty can of gasoline!), the segment is rather ridiculous and carries no sense of drama or danger.

Looking at each playwright's

contribution on its own merits, the project is marginally more successful. O'Hara's opening scene, "Drinks & Desire," depicts the flirtation and negotiation between Roy (Glenn Cruz) and Sutter (Chad Beckim). The dialogue is spare yet sexually charged. As the scene progresses, we discover that the men are not strangers; Roy is married to Sutter's sister. O'Hara plays with the boundaries of love and fidelity, gay sex and straight identification, and the limits of desire as reflected by what a person will or will not do in bed.

Yew's scene, "Faces of Ants," immediately follows O'Hara's and introduces the character of Roy's wife, Sammi (Molly Pearson). It is written in a style reminiscent of this playwright's *A Language of Their Own*: The characters narrate their feelings and situations in a poetic text that is at times tender and at other times graphically sexual.

Occasionally, the characters seem to talk to each other or, at least, each one seems to overhear what the other is narrating to the audience. Yew also brings the racial dynamic of the play into focus. Roy is played by an Asian American while Sutter is played by a Caucasian, yet the actors' racial backgrounds do not appear to have much significance in O'Hara's section; here, it's clearly established that the

racial difference between Roy and his white wife does matter, and the language that they employ when talking to each other reflects this.

True to O'Hara's rules, each of the following sections ups the ante, furthering the action along in unexpected ways; but none are as compelling as these first two scenes. "It Happens," written by Sanchez, is the most entertaining. "The Ballad of Sammi," by Wilson, is the most bizarre. Several writers grapple with the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, and nearly all of the characters form an elaborate daisy chain. Frank descriptions of sex or depictions of sexual acts abound but quickly lose their power to shock or amuse. Most of the dialogue is stilted and the pacing is often slow.



Glenn Cruz, Melvina Jones, and Chad Beckim

in *Play*

(Photo © R. Lasko)

The acting is inconsistent as the cast members are forced to reconceive their characters from section to section. Cruz stumbles on his lines several times and his Roy reads flatly; this is a shame because the character, as written by several of the show's authors, seems quite complex. Beckim makes a good impression as Sutter throughout the majority of the show, particularly in a heartfelt confrontation with his sister in a hospital room towards the end of the play.

Other members of the six-person cast simply aren't given enough to do to allow for sustained character development. There's such a breathtakingly quick swing in the confidence level of Pearson's Sammi that a smooth transition is impossible, and Melvina Jones as Tamara seems like a different person in every scene she's in. Lionel Gentle as Ashad has little to go on to make his character substantial and Ivy Risser is saddled with the role of a person who may not really exist. (To say more than that would spoil one of the play's most outrageous, groan-inducing lines.)

O'Hara reserved the final segment of the play for himself; he attempts to wrap up all the storylines and bring the work to a definitive conclusion. Entitled "The Nature of Need," this section features the entire cast, sometimes in simultaneously staged, split scenes. Yet the closing moments are frustrating as O'Hara brings Roy and Sutter back to the same place where they started in Scene 1 without seeming to acknowledge what has transpired immediately before. Rather than creating a satisfying ending to *Play*, this only underscores the fact that the project as a whole fails to cohere.

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