

Theater Review - Punk it up

8 1/2 X 11 gets punk'd at Dad's Garage

By CURT HOLMAN Thursday January 29, 2004 12:04 am EST

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For a show subtitled "Punk Rock Will Never Die," Dad's Garage Theatre's *8 1/2 X 11* looks a little more like the "establishment" than the annual short-play festival's previous productions. For five years, *8 1/2 X 11* showcased the work of Atlanta writers and playhouses while holding each short play to a zany but distracting 11-minute limit.

This year's festival dispenses with both the locals-only hook and the beat-the-clock gimmick to commission new plays loosely unified by the punk theme, primarily from playwrights with a national reputation. *8 1/2 X 11* may not be a pure expression of punk's defiant spirit, but it rocks harder and tighter than the festival's earlier versions.



Music provides the overt theme to five of the evening's shorts, beginning with a performance from Atlanta rock band Clobber, a trio of marionettes voiced and operated by Jason Hines. Like Tenacious D, Clobber presents an outrageously funny reduction of rock band cliches, from power chords to profane lyrics. Clobber's rude, silly appearance lasts about the length of a comedy segment from "Late Night with Conan O'Brien," which is wise — any longer and the joke would wear thin.

Two *8 1/2 x 11* contributors play rock music in their "day jobs." Jon Pierson of punk band Screeching Weasel takes a snapshot of the music industry with "Contracts, or Our Van Could Be Your Life." The play cuts between a jaded pop star's (Matt Myers) press conference and four penniless band members inching to their next gig in a piece-of-crap van. Pierson shows an insider's familiarity with the above-it-all proclamations of successful musicians and the strung-out tedium of road trips.

In "Anarchy in the Gold Street Wimpy," David J. of English rockers Bauhaus and Love and Rockets flashes back to the Sex Pistols' noisy arrival in 1970s England. As the narrator, Geoff Uterhardt nails the working-class English accent and "piss off" attitude, just as the costuming evokes Johnny Rotten and Sid Vicious. "Wimpy" is infused with nostalgia more than rage, but with the authority of someone who has firsthand punk experience.

Two smaller, sketchier pieces consider the rock fan's perspective. Christian Danley of the cartoon "SeaLab 2021" animates man-on-the-street answers to the question: What is punk rock? (Replies range from a



confident "Anything that doesn't suck ass," to an uncertain "Green Day?") In Steve Yockey's "Stop Motion," three actors (Jon Benzinger, Alison Hastings and Spencer Stephens) describe the sensations of being in a punk rock audience. Yockey (a former *CL* staffer) constructs neat, insightful turns of phrase, such as the image of feeling "the music on the *inside*, trying to cut its way out."

The other plays engage the theme less overtly. The Black Flag song "My War" inspired Chay Yew's "Second Skin," the evening's most serious short. Yew begins with two immigrant boys playing baseball, the actors repeating the motions of pitching and catching. The Sept. 11 attacks interrupt the all-American activity, and Yew's poetic language builds to disturbing implications about what being an American can mean.

"Theater" by *Urinetown* co-creator Greg Kotis has no connection to music — unless you find a parallel between punk's raw, DIY ethos and the spontaneous creativity of improv comedy. The actors preen with hilarious self-importance and talk about how *real* acting begins when they ask the spectators, "How did you like the play?"

In the evening's cleverest entry, Megan Gogerty's "Rumple Schmumple," fairy-tale storytelling collides with post-feminist politics. Uterhardt plays a wicked storybook character who tricks a mother (Hastings) out of her baby, then has second thoughts when she explains the tribulations of modern parenting.

The *8 1/2 x 11* festivals seldom find consistent quality, but no duds spoil this year's bunch. Alice Tuan's "Don't Fuck With My Dotted Eye" could use a

sharper punch line but includes such amusing touches as an unctuous aromatherapist and a touchy patient mummified in bandages.

The five-player ensemble brings plenty of energy and versatility to the roles, although if Stephens were any more laid back, he'd disappear entirely. In "Wimpy," Hastings captures the glassy-eyed groupie look, while Uterhardt and Benzinger spend the evening competing over who has the most vivid comic presence. Uterhardt strikes the most absurd, faux-serious poses, while Benzinger makes the funniest faces, scrunching up his features until he resembles Popeye.

With a flexible, engaging theme and high writing standards across the board, *8 1/2 x 11: Punk Rock Will Never Die* only disappoints by being a bit short. You leave feeling like there's still room for an additional play or two to dig more deeply into punk's rebellious, streetwise spirit. *8 1/2 x 11* shows deep affection for punk rock, but it's closer to the respectful, tribute-style tunes of Rancid than the raging righteousness of the Clash.

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Comments

i There are no comments at this time.

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