

THEATER REVIEW

THEATER REVIEW; Festival of Short Gay Plays About Seeking Acceptance

By Anita Gates

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December 21, 2001, Section E, Page 4 Buy Reprints

VIEW ON TIMSMACHINE

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There are at least two good reasons to attend Unity Fest 2001. One is Tony Hamilton, talking to a man he has just met at a party -- a man he thought he liked -- and insisting loudly, "I am not refreshing!" The other is Bekka Lindström as a Ph.D. candidate breaking the no-food-and-drink rule at the library and wondering aloud about a feminist obligation to offer another woman some of her French fries: "Isn't that what Bella Abzug would do?"

Mr. Hamilton, who manages an unusual number of emotions behind a single, play-length smile, is in Peter Mercurio's two-man work "Refreshments." Ms. Lindström, whose directors have probably never had to instruct her to put more energy into her performances, is the sole player in Lisa Haas's "Stacked: A Deviant Doctoral Dissertation."

Both are part of Program B at this year's Unity Fest, an 18-work gay play festival divided into three intermissionless programs of six short plays each. Like the offerings in many theater festivals, the plays aren't all as polished or the scripts as tightly edited as they might be, but each work has a vital point to make. If there is a common theme, it's the characters' desire to connect and to be accepted for who they really are.

The first play, Robin Rice Lichtig's "St. Anthony and the Appendix," is about a boy (Frank Anthony Polito) on the verge of his 21st birthday, checking into a Roman Catholic hospital for an appendectomy, not realizing that "the major amputation," as the nun at the admitting desk (Leila Mansury) points out, isn't physical. It's time to separate from his mother (Ann Chandler) and declare his adulthood by telling her that he's gay, even though he's afraid she won't take the news well.

Linda Eisenstein's "F2F," in which Gisele Richardson talks about her first face-to-face meeting with a woman she had known only by e-mail, has an important message about the difficulty of not reacting to people in terms of their physical appearance. Unfortunately that message doesn't become clear until the end of the monologue.

Andrès J. Wrath's "Not Exactly Strangers" is a poetic two-man (Ivan Davila and Christopher Lawrence Kann) lament about a relationship that almost turned into growing old together in a great country house with a dog. "Blow," by Chay Yew, is a modest, disturbing drama about a young Asian-American man (Steven Eng) who enjoys oral sex on street corners but really wants his life in the United States to be like "The Mary Tyler Moore Show." The play is also about the homophobic, homicidal man (Keith Lorrel Manning) he seems destined to encounter.

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Unity Fest 2001 continues at the Bank Street Theater in the West Village through Dec. 30.

UNITY FEST 2001

Program B

An annual festival of gay plays. Produced Dennis Smith; lighting by Renée Molina; sets by Bekka Lindström; costumes by the company; sound by Patrick Wang; production stage manager, Shuhei Seo. Presented by the Fourth Unity. At the Bank Street Theater, 155 Bank Street, West Village.

ST. ANTHONY AND THE APPENDIX, by Robin Rice Lichtig; directed by James McLaughlin.

WITH: Frank Anthony Polito (Wally Wappinger), Leila Mansury (Sister Salvation), Mr. McLaughlin (St. Anthony), Ann Chandler (Mrs. Wappinger) and Tony Hamilton (Bob Stillwater).

F2F, by Linda Eisenstein; directed by Donna Jean Fogel.

WITH: Gisele Richardson (Helen).

REFRESHMENTS, by Peter Mercurio; directed by Brenda D. Cook.

WITH: John Jay Buol (Jim) and Tony Hamilton (Scott).

NOT EXACTLY STRANGERS, by Andrès J. Wrath; directed by Brenda D. Cook.

WITH: Ivan Davila (Rodregio) and Christopher Lawrence Kann (Riley).

STACKED: A DEVIANT DOCTORAL DISSERTATION, by Lisa Haas; directed by James McLaughlin.

WITH: Bekka Lindström (Sylvia).

BLOW, by Chay Yew; directed by Dennis Smith.

WITH: Steven Eng (Boy), Virginia Wing (Woman) and Keith Lorrel Manning (Man).