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Brief Encounters – Keep It Brief! Heller's Festival of Short Plays 2011

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Keep It Broef!

Rating: ★★★★★

To Festival Director Susan Apker's credit *Keep It Brief*, the second annual Heller Short Play Festival, attempts to support local writers and directors by showcasing their talents. Part light hearted fund raiser, *Keep It Brief* features eight new short plays written to include a briefcase. With the short form play being a difficult beast to master at the best of times, this inclusion posed an additional challenge to the many first time writers and several first and second time directors.

In *Standard Procedure*, a comedy by Rebekah Liston, we find an unnamed man in an airport hurrying to meet an unnamed woman, only to be intercepted by an overly zealous, unnamed airport security guard who wants to examine his briefcase. Liston's script is straightforward and direct, if relying a little too heavily on obvious devices such as an impossible to open lock, and has some genuinely funny moments. Kristin Harding's direction elicits some high octane performances, but oscillates uneasily between moments of light humour and slapstick and the balance is often uneven. Sean Stefanic as the Guard brings an over the top intensity that drives events forward and provides many of the more engaging moments. Philip Guerin as the hapless, frustrated Man is perfectly complimented by Shrae Johnson as the calmly patient Woman, and even if the ending is predictable, it's still a fitting and enjoyable one when it arrives.

The Adventures of the Piltdown Man by Stephanie Colburn spins an odd tale of Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Watson, a dubious Mr Collins and the remains of the Missing Link. Colburn has a definite flair for language and her rich wordplay convincingly conveys the tone and flavour of later Victorian novels. The play though relies too heavily on this and there is very little immediate action on stage, with conversations piled high with references to the Holmes Canon dominating the action and the story. Bill Janssens direction keeps things moving and Adrian Alexander as an older Holmes is convincing though not compelling. Morgan Belcher's Mr Collins brings some vibrancy and energy to proceedings and Ron Friedberg's Dr. Watson's is charmingly understated.

Jumper, the first of two plays by T.U. Professor Michael Wright, is a tight, compact piece centring on George, a man whose life has fallen apart and who is about to throw himself into a river, and

Procter, who is trying to dissuade him. Directed by Eli Wright, the pace is kept moving along nicely, though blocking could have been tighter, particularly around Procter. Kelly Robinson as the luckless George shows great skill as a character actor and Shrae Johnson's Procter is extremely engaging, deftly handling her characters key transition.

The Intervention, the first of two plays by Kelley Childers Friedberg, assisted on this occasion by her husband Ron, is an often clever comedy that subverts the notion of addiction. Here a family have called in an addiction counsellor to facilitate an intervention. Ron Friedberg's direction shows a strong flair for pace and timing, but staging and movement wasn't all it might have been, with actors sitting throughout for the most part. Performances though were of a good calibre. Kate Magee as the addict Chelsea was delightful, Morgan Belcher was convincing as her long suffering husband and Rosalie Mollica delivered the right amount of woe as the distraught mother. April Russell as Chelsea's concerned friend showed excellent comic timing and Lisa Cole delivered a wonderfully nuanced performance as the Intervention Counsellor.

Open by Daniel Hitzman was one of the most clever, simple and almost perfectly realised pieces of the evening. Set in an elevator that breaks down during a blackout, Hitzman's five characters, four women and one man named only by the floors on which they entered the elevator, are placed in a cauldron and forced to engage with each other. Trapped for hours, they decide to act like larger than life clichés they might like to see themselves as. Hitzman's script is funny, sharp and pacy and is perfectly complimented by Robert Young's excellent direction. The set is simplicity itself, a small, square border large enough to contain the actors. Lighting is masterfully handled through adapted cell phones and computer screens, barely illuminating the characters and shrouding them in darkness. Beka Buster, Kelly Robinson, Christopher Stefanic, Lindsey Lewis, April Russell and Angela Adams all give excellent performances. But perfection isn't quite achieved as the play stops rather than ends and leaves the story, and its character's journeys, feeling unfinished.

Fools the second entry by Michael Wright, is a comedy about a group of clowns, one of whom decides he wants to become a more menacing clown. This is less satisfying than *The Jumper*, as comedic potential is not fully realised, suggesting Wright is more at home as a writer of the dramatic. Director Susan Apker creates a colourful spectacle and keeps things moving along. Garrett Coats as clown leader Tubby, Kate McGee as the female clown Pet and Morgan Belcher as the rebel clown Klecko walk a fine line between the clown and the person behind the clown. Xavier Sagel as the Mexican styled clown Carumba supplies most of the belly laughs with a delightfully balanced performance.

There's Something In The Water, the second entry by Kelley Childers Friedberg again highlights Friedberg's wonderfully quirky imagination in this story of three female office workers, two of whom hear a cricket with whom they discuss a choice they must soon face. Friedberg's cricket is an incredibly clever and simple device which she utilises to great effect, but the play suffers by being in the short format, feeling like three acts condensed into one. Devices become a little too obvious with the numerous exits and entrances feeling forced at times, something that may not be so noticeable in a full length play. Miriam Mills directs proceedings with a focus on character and

sometimes the pace slackens at times. But Beka Buster's conflicted Audra is wonderfully realised, Angela Adams oblivious Lou is utterly charming and Shrae James' vulnerable yet determined Maya is outstanding.

Rounding out the evening is *Deus Ex Icebox* by Morgan Belcher, one of the funniest and slightly edgier pieces on show. Here we find the dishevelled Fred visited by God who he finds in his icebox. God, it transpires is a young, confident African American woman with a proclivity for drinking beer. Humour abounds when Fred's clean cut, Christian roommate Max returns home and finds himself falling in love with God and wanting to marry her. But the boyfriend of a girl Fred picked up earlier in the night is a hired assassin with orders to kill Max. This is all wonderfully tongue-in-cheek and never crosses the line into offending sensibilities, rather it challenges assumptions and expectations in a funny and clever way. Director Jarrod Kopp elicits some excellent performances but moments are lost with staging and blocking dividing the audience's attention at times, as when the killer and his girlfriend argue to the extreme stage left whilst God's reaction, which informs her final decision, is played sitting on a chair centre stage away from where the audience's attention has been focused. Performances though are excellent all round with Kelly Robinson's Fred, Philip Guerin's Max and Kaitlyn Hamilton's Girl all wonderfully realised. Jeremy Geiger's lovelorn, killer for hire is terrific and Lone Blocker as God is a revelation.

Mindful that there are many first time writers and directors being showcased, reviewing a show like *Keep It Brief* is always a delicate task as it serves no purpose to highlight strengths and ignore areas for improvement for the sake of sensitivities. Rather it is better to acknowledge that these are aspiring artists and accord them the respect they deserve by offering an informed and honest perspective upon which they can reflect. Otherwise it's just blowing smoke. Similarly with the Heller Shorts Festival itself, which though worthy, might look at the inclusion of a workshop process to help develop these writers and directors in the future. That said, major kudos are due to Susan Apker and her colleagues for providing, with little or no budget, an opportunity for new talent to show what it can do. *Keep It Brief* is a worthwhile endeavour, an enjoyable night's entertainment and something that should be supported and developed long into the future.

Keep It Brief! - Heller Short Play Festival 2011

Friday 19th, Saturday 20th August, 7.30 p.m and Sunday August, 21st at 2.00.p.m.

Henthorne Theatre

Admission: \$10.00



Chris O'Rourke
Tulsa Theater Examiner

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