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Youth steps up in The Emergence Project

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The Emergence Project

Rating: ★★★★★

So what do teenagers know about theatre? On the evidence of *The Emergence Project* quite a lot actually. With scripts written, performed and directed by young people *The Emergence Project*, presented by Youth Services Tulsa in association with Clark Theatre, shows an astonishing range of theatrical styles and displays some outstanding talent.

Narrators written by Jack Allen, is a surreal comedy with an extraordinary level of theatrical sophistication. Reminiscent of Beckett and Pirandello, *Narrators* tells the tale of three slightly mad narrators trying to escape through the stage's fourth wall. Karen Klein shows consummate skill and a natural gift for direction, cleverly using everything at her disposal (props, the performer's bodies and voices, the stage space) in wonderfully original ways. Performances too are wonderfully realised. Reid Patten, as spritely Narrator Number One, uses body movement to terrific effect. Luke Thompson as the weirdly wonderful Narrator Number Two shows remarkable comic timing and outstanding voice work. Ashley Luke, as school girl Narrator Number Three, perfectly pitches her delivery to embody the world weariness of her character without losing the plays rich sense of humour.

Prince Hamlet, My Roommate, written by Tess Paden, also shows a high degree of theatrical awareness. As much in keeping with Tom Stoppard's, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, as with the great work of the Bard himself, Paden cleverly posits a comic story which explores the relationship between Hamlet and Horatio prior to Shakespeare taking up the tale. Here the long suffering, bookish Horatio, played with wonderful understatement by Eli Wright, struggles to maintain his friendship with an arrogant, self-centred Hamlet, whose cockiness is brought to life in a confident performance by Bryce Nelson. Strongly supported by Nick Thompson as Lucentio, Anna Lansky as Rosencrantz and the author herself, Tess Paden, as Guildenstern, the play works towards its final resolution under the assured direction of Bryce Davis.

In keeping with the comedic and theatrical tastes of the previous pieces, *I Went To Your Wedding* by Luke Thompson, is a wonderfully funny tale in the style of Noel Coward, with a passing nod in the direction of Oscar Wilde. A comedy about love, money and status it tells the story of Leonard, a poor American, whose sweetheart Carmen is about to marry Henri, a wealthy Frenchman, for his

money. As much to please Reginald and Delilah, her now insolvent parents, Carmen's wedding day is all set to go but is thrown into disarray when Leonard arrives and agrees to pretend to be their servant. Luke Thompson's tightly written script shows a wonderful appreciation of the British Comedy of Manners and his performance as Reginald, Carmen's upper class father, is simply a revelation. Tess Paden as Delilah delivers a pitch perfect, upper class English accent and Conor Horton as the haughty Henri, brings out his character's contemptuousness both in his actions and his accent. Seth Christie as Leonard and Catherine Case as Carmen are incredibly engaging as the young lovers and their performances are ably supported by the rest of the cast which includes a confident Nick Thompson as Justice of the Peace and two comic cameos by Melanie Lakey as Julia and Nick Lutke as Sid, Leonard's parents. The action moves along smoothly under the capable direction of Damon Meadows.

Balancing out the flow of the night were two scripts by Nick Lutke. In contrast, Lutke's plays deal with contemporary teenage themes, speak directly in the language of teenage lived experience and provided the production with its only serious dramatic piece. Theatrically this is theatre for the MTV and digital generation and it looked pretty impressive. *Obtuse*, Lutke's dramatic piece, deals with self-hate and friendship in the life of Melanie, an abused high school girl who has resorted to bulimia to lose weight. Only the intervention of her friend Hannah forces her to confront her problems. Lutke's writing is often sharp and intelligent, and is at its best when it keeps its own voice and is unapologetically edgy as when Melanie stands in front of the mirror. The cafeteria scene, where Melanie is subjected to a stream of clever insults by a group of students is disturbingly real, uncomfortably capturing both humour and pain. The script doesn't pull many punches, but its strength lies in its unvarnished honesty. Lutke's script does, on rare occasions, resort to talking about self-esteem like a counsellor would rather than in his own voice, and this does undermine it a little bit. But the real issue here is that *Obtuse* is not a one act play, but a full length play begging to be realised. *Obtuse* has all the hallmarks of being a strong work in the making and, if fully realised, and Lutke is more than capable of doing it, could become a truly powerful play.

In directing *Obtuse* Jenna Curran skilfully brings its strengths to the front without ever resorting to sentimentality or avoiding the issues. Casting also is terrifically handled, with Stephanie Riddle as the abused Melanie giving a wonderfully touching performance. Melanie Lakey as Hannah, her no nonsense, friend to the end, is terrifically convincing, as is Eli Wright as Riley. Nikki Prince, Reid Patten, Catherine Case and Christopher Huddle are utterly convincing as insensitive students, as is Brianna Brown as Ms Blakely, the insensitive teacher. Tess Paden, as Melanie's abusive mother, also doubles up to play Ms Johnson, the counsellor, and gives a powerful performance that sets the tone of the piece.

In stark contrast Lutke's, *The Birthday Dinner*, is a comic delight. It tells the story of Frank, played with wonderful finesse by Lutke himself, who is out with his four BFF's, convincingly played by Nikki Price, Carly Cribbs, Catherine Case and Brianna Brown, for a birthday meal. A throwaway comment about killing the president lands him in hot water with the Secret Service, and more secrets come to light as the action unfolds. Tanner Friend's direction shows a wonderfully deft touch for handling fast paced comedy, bringing out the fullness of the humour without losing pace.

Lutke himself provides much of the laughs, but Brianna Brown as the overwrought Capelli and Carly Cribbs as the ditzy Lucy are a sheer joy to watch. The supporting cast of Krystal Brown and Bryce Nelson as waiters, Tess Paden and Sidney Cochran as Government Agents and Christopher Huddle as Jerri help to give the pieces depth and balance, each giving strong performances. Lutke's comic observations cover everything from Justin Bieber to the advantages of older versus younger waiters, and wouldn't be out of place in a first class sit-com.

Production values were high throughout and Brook Becker, Kaitlyn Lakey, Bailey Grufik and Crystal Nguyen did tremendous work staging managing, as did Emma Francois who appeared to be everywhere at once ensuring that scene changes were snappy and everything was in its place.

Forget that *The Emergence Project* is a both a worthwhile and much needed project. *The Emergence Project* is a great night's entertainment, is refreshing and engaging and provides an introduction to some of the most promising young writers, directors and performers to be found anywhere.

The Emergence Project runs at The Clark Theatre, June 10th and 11th at 7.30 pm, and June 12th at 2.00 pm.



Chris O'Rourke
Tulsa Theater Examiner

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