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Playhouse's The Origins Project aims high

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Performing a workshop reading of new works in front of the public has inherent problems. The unavoidable accusation of the work being developed in response to a focus group, or of pandering to public opinion risks the work being perceived as diluting its own artistic integrity. Accomplished actors performing the readings can unwittingly disguise, as well as highlight, weaknesses in the script. The audience, often comprised of well-wishers and friends, may not always be impartial or objective in their feedback. As can be the case with certain audience members who, with the best of intentions, inform the playwright as to how to write the play as they would like it written rather than judging the work on its own merits.

If these came into play at the opening night of Playhouse Theatre's *The Origins Projects* on October 6th, at the Tulsa Performing Arts Centre, they were amply compensated by some insightful and considered feedback along with some excellent performances. *The Origins Projects*, a three day, new works festival featuring five new pieces, kicked off with a double header of two short plays, *Love and Romance and Other Unexpected Catastrophes* by Christopher Martin and *Good for the Soul* by Cody Shelton,

Christopher Martin's *Love and Romance and Other Unexpected Catastrophes* is described as a collection of short plays, but the description is misleading as it is really a collection of short and, for the most part, independent sketches. Individually many stand up well as sketches, yet they don't offer enough contrast and depth to be considered short plays. Nor, collectively, do the three interlinking scenes featuring the same two characters at a concert do enough to justify calling the complete work a play. Martin's writing is undoubtedly funny, engaging and sharp, showing a wonderful flair for the off slant. His original take on Fabric Softener and the story of Abraham and Isaac show Martin is extremely adept at creating a strong sense of situation and some credible characters. But the work's overall lack of structure, cohesion and contrast would suggest that some more work is required to elevate this from a series of vignettes to that of a play. The potential is there, evidenced by some stand out performance which director Courtney Saunders elicited from an excellent cast of Sam Hunt, Kelsey Carroll, Taylor Mendenhall, Denise Rosa and Nate Stahlke.

Cody Shelton's *Good for the Soul* is a modern retelling of Dr Faustus where an early morning D.J named Lucky sells his soul to the Devil. His heart is good and reasons noble as he seeks to end the terminal illness of his angelic wife Annie and to provide his brother in law, and fellow DJ, Dan,

with the means to live a full life. Shelton shows some impeccable skills as a playwright with fast paced and engaging dialogue, characters that are so fleshed out and believable they're already capable of existing beyond the scope of the script and relationships and interactions that are an utter joy to behold. The sense of love and affection that permeates the play, generated by the various interactions between its three central characters, shows a remarkable degree of refinement. If the opening scene where Dan, made utterly believable by Nate Stahlke, argues with Lucky, played to perfection by Tyler Humphries, creates a sense of the wheels turning for too long before it finally takes off, it's almost forgivable due to the strength of the dialogue, characters and their interactions. This spills over into Sheldon's handling of the characters of Annie, played with a wonderful sense of joy and vulnerability by Tabitha Littlefield and Mike (Lucifer), who is given a subtle, understated ordinariness by Seth Harman. There is a lot of muscle here, but the bones of the play were not quite ready as some of the play's darker dimensions weren't as fully explored. *Good for the Soul* may require a full length format to fully bring the nuances and depths completely into play. In the hands of director Chris Crawford, *Good for the Soul* was riveting and engaging and suggests Sheldon has some series talent and some interesting shows to come.

Playhouse Tulsa have taken a risk in presenting *The Origins Project* to the public and, on this occasion, the risk definitely paid off. Yet there is no risk for the audience. For on the evidence to hand, *The Origins Project* promises to be fun, engaging, insightful and well worth seeing.

The Origins Project continues at the Tulsa Performing Arts Centre with

The Oath: A New Southern Gothic Play by Jacqueline Goldfinger on Friday, October 7th

Providence by Cody Daigle, October 8th at 2.00 p.m.

Barrier Island: First Play in the Galveston Cycle by David Stallings, October 8th, 7.30 p.m.



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