

Flag Day

"A play in two plays" by Lee Blessing

Reviewed July 15, 2004

Playing in the Studio Theatre

Running time: 1:55 - one intermission

A world premiere

The opening piece in this two-piece work displays the rock-solid single-mindedness that marks the finest of one-act plays. It demonstrates how a one-act play bears only as much resemblance to a "full length" play as a short story does to a novel. A good one-act play, just like a good short story, is pithy, precise and develops a single idea to its full potential - and then has the good sense to stop. It doesn't attempt to be, like a great novel is, a multi-level sampling of complicated reality with rich characters, situations and multiple themes. In what he titles *Good Clean Fun*, Blessing shows the skill of a surgeon, excising all extraneous material to focus exclusively on the concept at hand before he lets the audience stretch during intermission. If only he had brought the same rigor to the piece he titles *Down and Dirty* which follows intermission. Here, two stories, one fascinating and one potentially interesting, intersect and, as a result, damage each other.

Storyline: In *Good Clean Fun* a white racist and a black racist share a small office working on a two-man project in a company with a unique approach to workplace human relations issues: each employee is issued a timer and is allowed, even encouraged, to frankly express politically incorrect opinions only when the timer is ticking away. Repeated bursts of frank statements reveal the depths of hatred between the two who have more than on-the-job conflicts, as one has impregnated the wife of the other. In *Down and Dirty* Blessing mixes the fascinating story of a black woman who deals with a homeless white man she hit and impaled on the windshield of her car by simply waiting for him to bleed to death so she can bury the body, with the merely potentially interesting story of a writer interacting with the events of the story about which he has either written or read.

Oh, what fun is *Good Clean Fun*! Lovers of sharp, flashy dialogue and high concept scenes will revel in the exchanges between the black supervisor and the white subordinate who reveal more and more about their relationship with each start of their egg timers. The script is precisely as long as it needs to be to mine the concept, and not a line longer. Blessing's command of his craft is evident in the way he avoids weighing down the early portion of the short piece with lengthy explanations of the concept of the egg timers and the unique policy of the company for which these two characters work. Instead, the audience only gradually learns what it needs to know to understand the concept. Lee Sellers is superb at switching between light banter and soul-bearing blasts and Albert Jones matches him blast for blast, taunt for taunt.

Sellers is again superb as the impaled victim of a hit and carry. He finds a way to underplay what is essentially an extended death scene and he does so with practically no range of motion available since he is suspended in mid air throughout the piece. He manages to communicate the burnt out nature of his character who doesn't seem to expect anything better of life than he is receiving, and he does so with just his voice, his eyes and an occasional guttural groan. Roslyn Wintner never really gets to delve into the depths of her character because Blessing writes her out of the middle section of the playlet to introduce Michael Flanigan as the writer who ruminates on the nature of time, history, diversity and the act of sharing a beer. After such a strong start, *Down and Dirty* turns frustratingly facile.

One of the pleasures of attending the festival each year is the consistently intelligent, functional and unique work of Markas Henry who designs the sets for all the productions. There will be comments on his work for the other three productions of this year's festivals in their individual reviews, but it is his work for this two-playlet piece that deserves the highest praise. He found a way to unite the two very different settings as a way of reinforcing the playwright's unity of theme for both of these one-act pieces which are about the confining nature of hatred. Henry criss-crossed the square playing space in the small studio theater with ropes that define the small office which is a fight ring for the first half of the evening, and then stretches the ropes up to

suspend the hit-and-carry victim played by Sellers, window and all. The image of Sellers hanging overhead is reinforced by the sharp lighting design which places an equally striking shadow on the rear wall. There are times when you want to watch the shadow instead of the real thing, but then you'd miss the intriguing and uncredited makeup effect which has the blood from Sellers wounds running slowly down his head. Visually, the segment following the intermission is as arresting as the writing makes the portion which precedes it.

Written by Lee Blessing. Directed by Lucie Tiberghien. Design: Markas Henry (set) Moe Schell (costumes) Thomas C. Hase and Troy Martin-O'Shia (lights) Jamesevanpilato (sound) Ron Blunt (photography) Robyn Henry (stage manager). Cast: Michael Flanigan, Albert Jones, Lee Sellars, Roslyn Wintner.