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HOME ARTS AND CULTURE **BACKSTAGE OUTRAGE**

Wednesday, May 30, 2012

Backstage outrage

Egos and ideals clash in entertaining 'Understudy'
by Paul Wozniak



"Understudy" lightly satirizes the unglamorous reality of backstage Broadway. Peppered with insider jokes and literary analysis of Kafka, Theresa Rebeck's script has a distinctly uneven rhythm as characters digress about the underappreciation of "real" art. Fortunately, director Rob Roznowski counters with abundant comic beats, providing plenty of room for the show to breathe. The result is a character-driven production that feels spontaneous and natural from beginning to end.

Bitter and cynical, Harry (Tony Caselli) despises current Hollywood blockbusters. However, without big-screen credentials, even Harry's theatrical acting options are limited. Through an unfortunate coincidence, Harry is understudying for one film star in a two-person Kafka drama — alongside another action star and Harry's object of scorn, Jake. Played by Drew Parker, Jake has the dashing features that have earned him over \$2 million per picture to scream dialogue like "Get in the truck!"

Coordinating the rehearsal is stage manager Roxanne (Michelle Held), whose unresolved history with Harry drudges up raw emotions for both. What begins as a dysfunctional working relationship between the three quickly devolves into absolute anarchy.

Parker and Caselli crackle with mutual distrust and animosity that slowly morphs into warm respect. Both believe the other to be an inferior actor. Watching them prove otherwise to each other is a treat.

Held holds her own as Roxanne, her face in a constant setting of exasperation, frustration, and sheer disbelief. Much of her anger is directed at an unseen technician named Laura, whose mishaps at the board further delay the already tense rehearsal.

Bartley Bauer's minimal scenic design literally makes the audience feel part of the rehearsal set. Sound by Julia Garlotte and lighting by Alex Gay add to the illusion of set pieces moving in and out, even though the details are left to the imagination.

While a little experience in theater adds to the appreciation of "The Understudy," it is hardly a prerequisite. At its heart, "The Understudy" is a workplace comedy with some scathing dialogue. It's not "Kafka's undiscovered masterpiece," but it is highly entertaining.

'The Understudy'

Through June 17

Williamston Theatre

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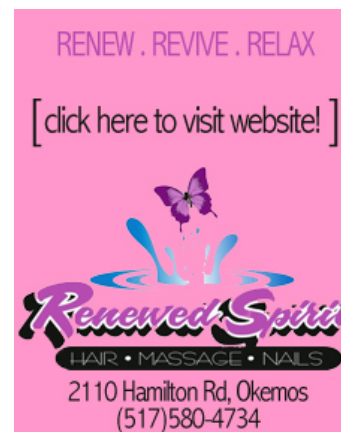
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