



MADLAB THEATRE

In a scene from *The Angels of Lemnos*, from left: Stephen Woosley, Jim Azelvandre and Andy Batt

DIFFICULT ROLE BRINGS OUT BEST IN ACTOR, HEAD OF TROUPE

BY MICHAEL GROSSBERG | THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

At the heart of one of the most ambitious MadLab Theatre productions is a deceptively simple character.

The homeless Nathan Spandrel is played by Andy Batt in *The Angels of Lemnos*, which has enjoyed a popular March run — through Saturday — at the theater, 105 N. Grant Ave.

Batt, along with Jim Azelvandre, anchors the area premiere of the poignant two-act drama by Chicago playwright Jim Henry.

The play concerns Nathan's search for the "gift from God," he was promised years earlier by a fifth-grade teacher.

When he discovers an abandoned baby in a trash can, Nathan believes he has found his gift — and becomes determined to take his "angel baby" back to heaven.

at a glance

The Angels of Lemnos

MADLAB THEATRE,
105 N. GRANT AVE. (614-221-5418,
WWW.MADLAB.NET)

SHOWTIMES » 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday

TICKETS » \$10 to \$15, or \$8 for students and senior citizens, \$6 for members

"It's a tragic drama with moments of levity," said Batt, managing director of MadLab.

"Our opening night had quite a few laughs. I think that's because

Nathan is so endearing to the audience. Amidst all the horrible things that have happened to him in his life, he's still a fairly happy-go-lucky character who tries to see the best in people and life."

Some individuals might take a fifth-grade teacher's promise metaphorically — but not Nathan.

"People notice early that he's very simple, developmentally challenged," Batt said, "but you don't know why."

To make the portrayal more convincing, Batt worked closely with the director and her assistant, Jennifer Feather, to develop Nathan's childlike speech and oddly childlike physicality.

"Andy came a long way with this

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role," director Nikki Smith said.

Of his many MadLab performances during the past six years, she said, his latest stands out as his best.

Stepping into the part after another actor withdrew, Batt had to draw upon some painful memories to tackle the part, which he ranks among his most difficult — and personal.

"I never suffered the types of tragedies that Nathan did, but . . . I had issues with my father," Batt said. "I'm not the

kind of guy to get choked up, but, playing this role, I've had tears in my eyes.

"As an actor, I love to take roles that push me further than I have been before, and Nathan is certainly one of those roles. He has a lot of honesty inside him."

Somewhat similar characters are portrayed in movies

such as *Forrest Gump*, *Rain Man* and *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, Batt said.

"Those movies are good examples of how such characters are played well," he said. "Too often, directors go for the easy thing and send the character over the top."

At a recent performance, Batt settled convincingly into

the type of role that waylays some actors because of its tricky mannerisms.

Azelvandre is strong but subtle as Girtie, the friend who tries to help Nathan and, later, the baby.

Jill Hartley, Amanda Howell, Linda O'Donnell, Kyle Sweeney and Stephen Woosley nimbly play characters from Nathan's past during flashbacks within his scrambled memory.

Doug Northeim's lighting and scenic design deserves praise, too.

The Angels of Lemnos represents a step forward for MadLab.

mgrossberg@dispatch.com

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