

Out of the running for father of the year

BY RICHARD ADES

The Angels of Lemnos is the kind of production MadLab should be doing more often.

Jim Henry's dark and funny script gives the troupe's players more to sink their acting chops into than the original pieces the company has specialized in lately. Not only that, but director Nikki Smith stages it with far more atmosphere than is commonly seen in the tiny theater.

The audience is divided into two halves, allowing the entire middle of the room to be turned into the wintry streets and alleys where Henry's homeless characters live. A glowing, smoking trash can serves as their furnace, while a larger trash bin in the corner plays an important role in the plot.

It's into this bin that an unknown woman drops a baby who is quickly discovered by Nathan, a mentally handicapped man. Thinking the tyke is the gift from God he's been waiting for all his life—and a sign that the end of his miserable existence is finally at hand—Nathan prepares to "float" up to heaven with the child by his side. In the meantime, he provides the baby with as little food and warmth as possible, since they would only delay what Nathan sees as their mutual salvation.

But Nathan is not alone on the streets. Another homeless man named Girtie has heard that a baby has been abandoned, and he suspects Nathan knows its whereabouts. He's determined to prevent his friend from harming either himself or the unseen infant.

Tackling a part more difficult than any he's played in recent memory, Andy Batt gives Nathan a deliberate and eccentric speaking style and fluttering hand movements. It's a bold portrayal, but one that seldom becomes more than a collection of mannerisms. If Batt can allow Nathan's personality to be seen through the surface manifestations, it will be a powerful performance.

Making up for Batt's unfinished portrayal, Jim Azelvandre plays Girtie with his customary level of conviction. Amanda Howell, Jill Harley, Linda O'Donnell, Stephen Woosley and Kyle Sweeney fill out the cast as a changing collection of other characters from Nathan's present and past.

It's in the flashbacks that Henry reveals how Nathan came to live on the street and how he developed his odd views of life and death. Smith handles the time shifts with fluid precision, and she turns one of the incidents from Nathan's past—his first

date—into a magical combination of poetic language and twinkling lights.

For Nathan, it represents a moment of joy that is bittersweet because it's so rare. For MadLab, it represents a moment of hope because it shows what the little theater can do when it makes the best use of its many talents.

What price fame?

Tabloid, Shadowbox's first original musical in 10 years, is billed as a look at the celebrity fixation that seems to have America in its grip. In reality, though, its subject is not so much why we're obsessed by celebrities as it is why people want to be famous in the first place.

In the case of Tanya Michelle Jones (Amy Lay), the Anna Nicole Smith-like figure at its center, she simply wants a better life for herself. Since she has no assets beyond her good looks, she's willing to use them to get what she wants, which puts her at the mercy of a success-at-any-price agent (David Whitehouse) and a bottom-feeding TV producer (Robbie Nance).

Finally, it puts her in the morgue, which

is where she is when the show begins. The story of how she got there is told through two-plus hours' worth of flashbacks.

Tabloid's book is written by Jimmy Mak, whose love of classic films can be seen in his *Citizen Kane*-style approach to her life story: Sally Dubrowski (Stacie Boord), a reporter for a rag called the *News Acquirer*, begins investigating her past after being assigned to find the meaning of Tanya's final utterance, which was not "Rosebud" but the letters "E-A-P." Further evidence of Mak's movie fan-

dom can be seen in the screwball-comedy-style banter Sally trades with her brusque editor, Bud Orson (Steve Guyer).

The banter, unfortunately, is little more than vintage window dressing, but the *Kane* structure gives Mak an efficient way to introduce viewers to Tanya and the colorful folks who knew her. For instance, there's Danielle Jones (Julie Klein), her estranged mother; Bethany Styles (Christina Conner), her Brittney Spears-like drinking buddy; and J. Harrington Bible (Tom Cardinal), the ancient millionaire who becomes her husband.

Along the way, the musical treats viewers to several entertaining scenes, including a

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Canned heat: Jim Azelvandre and Andy Batt (from left) in *The Angels of Lemnos*