

THEATER REVIEW | THEATRE ROULETTE 2007

Experimental program provides more gems than cinders

By Michael Grossberg
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Theatergoers who take their chances every year at MadLab's Theatre Roulette should be satisfied with the odds of finding a winner at the eighth annual festival, which opened Thursday.

Newcomers to the process of finding and producing worthy new plays, however, must have the patience to sit through a dud (or two) as the company swings from one genre and melodramatic extreme to another.

Judging from "Foreshadows," the first of three evenings of short works, MadLab has discovered an interesting collection of comedies and dramas — plus an odd failed experiment. *The Apple*, the only work by a central Ohio playwright, is the



MADLAB

Josh Kessler in *Please Remove This Stuffed Animal From My Head*

best of the first evening. Jim Azelvandre offers a series of clever snapshots on the theme of first encounters and romantic fantasies.

Jennifer Feather and Jon

► Theatre Roulette 2007 continues through May 26 at MadLab, 105 N. Grant Ave. Tickets cost \$10 to \$15, or \$8 for students and senior citizens, \$6 for members. For a schedule of performances, call 614-221-5418 or visit www.madlab.net.

Osbeck play strangers who meet on a park bench — again and again and again. Some scenes are her fantasies; others, maybe his.

Which are "real," and which are imagined?

Part of the fun of watching the characters interact in increasingly complex ways is trying to figure that out.

Clearly inspired by the time-bending, short sketch-comedies of David Ives (*All in the Timing*, *Mere Mortals*), Azelvandre adopts a brisk pace of farce to frame more wistful or passion-

ate moments and insights in short scenes that alternate with blackouts.

Osbeck is fine in multiple variations, from a shy bookworm to a lustful lothario who takes the woman's repeatedly dropped or flaunted apple as a modern emblem of interest — much as 19th-century gentlemen picked up a dropped handkerchief.

Feather's wry, sly performance also stands out under Nikki Smith's direction.

Another strong actress gives a much-needed foundation of realism to the potential melodramatic overkill of *Tangled*.

Terence Anthony's intense drama, which closes the evening with a thud of finality, offers a portrait of a young woman trying to drown her memories and herself in drugs and alcohol.

As Tanita, Melissa Bair delivers a nuanced and understated performance — relatively speaking, given the excessive dialogue — that avoids clichés.

Credit for that must be shared by Azelvandre, who directs what for him is the evening's second triumph.

Haunted by her late father (Andy Batt) and tormented by a landlord (Kevin Scott), Tanita tries to use violence and manipulate the men to her own self-destructive ends.

Batt and Scott maintain some dignity amid the histrionics. But Bair's performance keeps *Tangled* from getting too tangled up in melodrama.

Please Remove This Stuffed Animal From My Head, Crystal Jackson's metaphoric fantasy about abortion, falls flat.

The role-reversal scenario — about a world in which men

struggle to get permission to remove stuffed, well, you've read the title — quickly becomes predictable and heavy-handed.

A few people laughed Thursday, but more in agreement than in merriment, as Batt and Scott strained to build a comic rhythm opposite the sympathetic victim played by Josh Kessler.

This abortive experiment provides just another example of the way too many playwrights speak smugly only to those who share their politics — and thus sympathetically excuse the excesses or flaws of the scripts.

You want provocative theater at a new-play festival? How about challenging the audience's politically correct assumptions for once?

mgrossberg@dispatch.com