

DCAC goes gutter

by Terrance Heath

There is a small, dark room in Adams Morgan containing more than its share of passion, noise and thunder, in the form of the D.C. Arts Center's production of Julie Thompson's "The Crackwalker." The play covers the ups and downs of a down-and-out group of friends in Kingston, Canada, living their lives far beyond the margins of the middle class and trying desperately to find an escape. The writing, acting and directing offer an unflinching look at the dark and violent realities of the lives of marginalized people.

The ensemble cast and the director pull few punches in delivering a disturbing vision of these lives. Each member of the cast contributes to creating characters that are at once sad, frightening and sympathetic. Aside from a few stray bite-marks on the scenery, the realism of each performance is nearly overwhelming, especially in combination with the intimate setting of the theater and a set design that places the audience practically in the characters' living room — and the characters literally in the audience's faces.

Michele Biancosino's direction allows the actors to flesh out their characters without affect. The most nuanced performances are Suzanne Richard's portrayal of Theresa, a mentally challenged woman with a reputation for promiscu-



by Lowell Brown

Tyson Lien (top) and Suzanne Richard play down-and-out lovers in "The Crackwalker."

ity; and Tyson Lien's portrayal of Alan, Theresa's equally challenged fiancé.

However, a great cast and competent direction do not entirely overcome a story that seems to have good intentions but falls short of completely explaining or fulfilling those intentions. While Thompson's writing has the feel of social commentary, the characters' world is so narrow and the audience's view of it so limited. Without another social strata for comparison, it is difficult to know what point Thompson is making, other than pointing out the difficulties of being poor and marginalized.

Much is hinted at in the story. A distrust of the social "system" pervades the writing, but just how that system keeps the characters at the bottom of the social heap is never quite made clear. In fact, at times the characters seem to reject the attempts by "the system" to help them live better lives, like ignoring the recommendations of doctors and social workers. Alan seems to have a more-than-friendly interest in his hard-drinking, wife-abusing buddy, Joe, but even this "gay" subplot is just a few millimeters too far below the surface for most to notice it. And while Joe takes advantage of an opportunity to lift himself and his wife, Sandra, out of their dead-end existence, most of his metamorphosis takes place off stage, and only a new hat and jacket suggest that any great change has taken place.

"The Crackwalker" succeeds at making its audience aware of the lives people lead just beyond the shadows of our own society, going so far as to drag the audience into the dark corners where those lives occur, but then leaves them there without much explanation or possibility of escape. Perhaps this is another aspect of its realism, placing the characters and the audiences in a dark, gritty, violent world where there are few explanations or clear definitions; and a slim chance of escape.

However, the audience eventually leaves the theater asking the same question that the play's characters ask in one way or another: Why? "The Crackwalker" effectively illuminates the reality behind the question, but stops short of shedding light on a possible answer.

INFO

'The Crackwalker'

Through Dec. 15
District of Columbia Arts Center
2438 18th St. NW
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