

'Biting Dog' Runs Delightfully Amok

By Dolores Gregory Special to The Washington Post Saturday, May 17, 2003;
Page C01

This is my love letter to Michael John Casey. I admit it, I'm smitten. And you would be, too, if you saw what this man does in "White Biting Dog," the season finale from the ever-surprising Project Y Theatre Company.

Casey plays Glidden, the sleep-walking patriarch of a woefully troubled clan. He is dying from an unnamed respiratory illness. His wife has left him for a man half his age. His son is drifting into psychosis. His son's girlfriend is taking orders from a white dog. In other words, this be madness, as only Canadian playwright Judith Thompson can render it. And in this absurdist examination of love and its discontents, Casey is the perfect man for the part of the rejected but devoted husband. Rubber-faced, wiry, wild-eyed, yet completely in control, he is a wonderfully physical performer who exploits the crazy turns in Thompson's play for the best comic effect. At the same time, he maintains an emotional integrity that allows us to invest in him even as the play jerks us all over the room.

As frenetic and strange as Casey is in this play, though, he edges out his fellow actors by only the slightest advantage. The entire cast in fact is quite wonderful, with nary a missed beat in a play that has to be a minefield of potential miscues.

I won't venture an analysis of Thompson's text. For that, I would need chemical assistance. But take it from me, it's wacko. Generally, it concerns the efforts of Glidden's son Cape (Jon Townson) to save his father's life by luring his mother back home. The mother, Lomia, is a slatternly, talkative thing played as a Carol Burnettesque schizoid by Lindsay Allen, a truly brave actress who is chronologically far too young for the part but who manages nevertheless to convince us that she is easily twice the age of the actor who plays her lover, Pascal. Sure, the eyeliner on her forehead is visible from the third row, but who cares? Wait till the second act finale -- when she pulls out all the stops in a striptease number that

will leave you gasping for air. Then you can decide whether the show's production values add up.

But to get back to the so-called story line, Cape is assisted in his mission of family restoration by Pony, a girl who wanders into his house one night and manages to fall in love with him almost instantly. Pony is gifted with second sight, as well as perfect pitch, and so she erupts periodically into seizures or songs, and the result is that Cape is nudged along in the direction of marriage as well as an extreme, last-ditch effort to scare off Pascal.

Director Michole Biancosino keeps the whole thing moving at the required speed -- which is to say, like a freight train. Still, amid the play's gyrations, she finds a through-line of poignancy that rests, ultimately, in Casey's character and his romantic quest for reunion with the only woman he ever loved -- a cold-hearted, self-centered, cake-devouring witch. Love is a dangerous thing in Thompson's world, but happily for us, her take on it is weirdly entertaining, even if the point she drives for is a bit elusive.

White Biting Dog, by Judith Thompson. Directed by Michole Biancosino. Music by Glen Oliff; lighting, Mike Daniels; set, Sara Nelson and Drew Harmon; costumes, Franklin Labovitz. With Jason Lemire and Tara Giordano. Produced by Project Y Theatre Company. Through June 4 at the Source Theatre, 14th and T streets NW. Approximately 2 hours 15 minutes with an intermission. Call 202-462-1073, Ext. 12.

© 2003 The Washington Post Company