



Everything New Orleans

Stellar acting takes center stage in intriguing 'Stories'

By Keith I. Marszalek

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By David Cuthbert

You don't often see acting as good as what's onstage in "Collected Stories" at the Alamo Underground.

And certainly not in a rudimentary Crete Street basement theater space, lacking such basic creature comforts as air-conditioning -- but with strategically placed fans and complimentary iced, bottled water.

Frankly, it was only at intermission that I noticed the muggy-wuggy atmosphere. While Nancy Hartman White and Alexis Jacknow were emoting, this audience member was fully engaged.

Donald Margulies' role-reversal play about an established short story writer and her student-assistant is facile but fascinating, carefully constructed and full of questions for which there are no easy answers.

Ruth Steiner is a literary star who teaches and gives tutorials to promising graduate students. Enter Lisa Morrison, her starry-eyed fan-cum-fanatic, who quotes from all of Steiner's works. At their first meeting, Steiner drinks in her praise and gives the performance she obviously trots out at every first meeting, that of the sophisticated, cynical Manhattan intellectual. Her advice, however, is practical:

"Talking takes away the need to write about it."

"You can't censor your creative impulses because you're going to hurt somebody's feelings."

"We're all scavengers -- all writers are -- shamelessly!"

Lisa is an apt pupil and, despite Ruth's prickly nature, works -- or worms (you decide) -- her way into the older woman's confidence over the years (1990 to 1996), to the point where Ruth reveals things about herself that she's never used in her writing, because "There are some things you don't touch."

Lisa's growing independence begins with sending off a story to a literary journal without telling her, to appropriating the most personal elements of her mentor's life for her first novel. Their six scenes together, which all have tetchy undercurrents, explode in the crackling confrontation we've been expecting.

Margulies' dialogue is pleasingly playable (although there is too much name-dropping, which he turns around as a joke on the audience), and as interesting for what's not said, as what is.

There is a beautiful progression to the performances. White's Ruth is a fully realized character whose glamorous, brusque assurance gradually melts into a fiercely focused, complex anger and fear. Expressive physically and vocally, and recently arrived in New Orleans, White immediately improves our theatrical landscape.

Alexis Jacknow plays down her beauty (as best she can) as the young, gushing Lisa who hangs on Ruth's every word. We are close enough to the performers to see quicksilver expressions, even thoughts, wash over their faces. Jacknow's physical and emotional transformation is incremental and quite impressive. The heightened naturalism with which Gabrielle Reisman has directed serves the piece while addressing the space's problems.

The relationship between the two women inevitably evokes Eve Harrington and Margo Channing in "All About Eve," but is even more layered and complicated in handling questions of what is permissible in art and life.

Walker Reisman's lighting is better than you'd expect and the Greenwich Village apartment setting is sketchily suggested.

All that really matters is that you can see and hear the actresses (posts interfere with sightlines and some blocking might be rethought), because when you can, "Collected Stories" is first-rate theater.

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COLLECTED STORIES

WHAT: Jump the Fence Productions and the NOLA Project present Donald Margulies' play, directed by Gabrielle Reisman.

WHEN: Final performances Thursday and Friday at 8 p.m.

WHERE: The Alamo Underground, 1547 Crete St.

TICKETS: \$8.

CALL: (504) 481-4091

Nancy Hartman White plays literary mentor to Alexis Jacknow's young writer in 'Collected Stories' at the Alamo Underground.

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