



theatre company

reviews

henry hettinger

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'Henry' a dyspeptic dysfunction drama

By Nina Metz

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Through a coincidence of timing, local playwright Stephen Cone has two works currently on stage in Chicago, and both speak to his interest in perversely messed-up dramas that infect the modern-day family. He is also a skillful writer with a dyspeptic wit--a combination hard to pass up in this age of perpetual irony.

"Henry Hettinger," which premiered last weekend at The Side Project in Rogers Park, revolves around the idea of redemption, religious and otherwise. The title character is a sex offender just released from a 20-year jail term. And as played by Michael Nowak, he returns to the real world with a stunning lack of self-awareness or remorse. It is a biting performance, and Nowak (who is also host of "Let's Talk Gardening" on WGN-AM 720) finds a way to make this behavior seem plausible, even if his actions scream "bonkers."

It is Christmastime and Henry--looking like he's about to mow the lawn in shorts and a shirt--busts in on the home he once shared with his wife, Melanie (Susan Price, elegant and complex), who is now his former wife, remarried to an easy-going, choir-singing schlub named Jeremy (Will Schutz, underplaying it just right).

Henry's arrival--and that of his adult daughter (Stacy Magerkurth), and Melanie and Jeremy's teenage son (Ryan Curtin)--causes all manner of turmoil in the household, not the least of which is Melanie's conflicted feelings about a man she once deeply loved, and perhaps still does.

"These are ministers, special-education teachers, a dentist, professional people," an undercover FBI agent was quoted in the Trib earlier this week about some of the arrested members of NAMBLA (The North American Man/Boy Love Association). "They're your next-door neighbor, your kid's coach." But what if they're not some "other" person outside your home? What if they're a family member you might still care about? Can you embrace that person in your life? Should you?

These are compelling questions and Cone, who also directs, has the savvy to explore all the angles--even Henry's delusions about the benign nature of his sexual relationship with a 12-year-old boy.

One notable characteristic of Cone's writing is his ear for dialogue, also on display in "Young Wives," one of the mini-plays well worth seeing in Collaboraction's Sketchbook, at the Chopin Theatre through Aug. 27. Like fellow Chicago playwright Brett Neveu, Cone is a master of the half-utterance, and he finds music in the most banal sputterings and "huhs?" of everyday conversation.

Through Sept. 10 at The Side Project Theatre, 1439 W. Jarvis Ave. Tickets are \$15 at 773-973-2150.