

Working It Out at CENTERSTAGE

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Centerstage's *Working It Out* contains several nicely executed snatches of comedy, as well as a few earnest attempts at heartfelt emotion. Earnest, but not exactly successful. The problem is not that the performances are unconvincing—since, in fact, the actors that director Jason Loewith has assembled tackle some outlandish roles (hitmen, disillusioned artists, and stuck-up film industry types) without any real awkwardness. The problem, here, is one of format. Clocking in at about ninety minutes and pulling together elements of three plays by three very different playwrights, *Working It Out* shifts around so much that an immersion in the fate of any of its characters—an extended investment, in other words, in the questions of personal desire and professional duty that all the selections raise—becomes just about impossible.

But what hurts the drama is what, oddly enough, often enhances the comedy. There is an inadvertent touch of Monty Python in the relatively quick movement from piece to piece. And by staging this kind of liveliness in Centerstage's cabaret-style Head Theater, Loewith and his production team have indicated that showing the audience a good time, not inducing pity and terror, is the primary goal. However, there are times when the way *Working It Out* is organized serves valuable thematic ends. In its finer moments, there is something about the combined monotony and variety of the modern-day job market that this showcase captures. It moves from scene to scene and scenario to scenario, yet never leaves certain conflicts behind.

The offering that deploys such short, rapid form with the best results is Rick

Cleveland's *Jerry & Tom*. As the action progresses, the piece's contract killer protagonists (Luke Robertson and Vasili Bogazianos, respectively) move through a variety of victims, all played by a single actor (John Ramsey). Cleveland had intended these unfortunates to be dispatched "just like the way characters get killed in cartoons," and the switches in setting—a car dealership, a hotel, a bus station, the usual Mafia haunts—manage to up the energy without being disorienting.

This revolving door effect is sometimes handled quietly, sometimes handled with a darkness and near-absurdity that is no less interesting. (One of Cleveland's most inspired strokes—a long, involved monologue about a man without a nose—is, like many a scene in Samuel Beckett, so exorbitantly gruesome that it can't keep from being funny.) However, *Jerry & Tom* tries to delve deeper. This doesn't quite work, partially because the most harrowing speeches are too quick, too contained, and involve things offstage. As a newcomer to his profession, Robertson's Jerry worries about the personal and familial stakes of the life he has chosen, yet also thinks that injecting a syringe filled with air into a jugular vein is a really cool way to score a kill. We get to see Robertson play out the latter episode, which he does quite well. We don't get to see Jerry hold a gun to his crying infant's forehead—an episode that is mentioned only late in the game. Still, Robertson seems unexpectedly, compellingly comfortable in his role. So does Bogazianos, who plays the older Tom with a composure and a veteran's affability that may conceal a moral void worse than anything Jerry has to deal with. But what, in thirty action-packed minutes or thereabouts, can you really make of an idea like that?

Lynn Rosen's office drama, *Washed Up on the Potomac*, runs into similar hurdles, and that the cast for this one is almost twice as large surely doesn't help. Set in a

proofreading agency, the piece draws together a pair of young employees with greater aspirations (Garrett Neergaard and Katie Jeffries), a baffled writer (Amy Hohn), and a character that the program simply calls “Unseen Guy” (Joseph Wycoff). Much of the comedy depends on treating these characters as types—which may be why Unseen Guy earned the loudest laughs at the showing I attended. Perhaps not content with easy satire, Rosen also, and often unwisely, wants to treat her creations as complex individuals. Since even this office’s cloying administrator (Kate Buddeke) doesn’t seem all that unsympathetic, everyone else’s open rebelliousness has a way of seeming out of place.

This may not be an uncommon milieu. Yet Rosen’s world is distinguished by a shock of morbidity stronger than anything you’d expect from a workplace comedy like *The Office* or *Office Space*. The murder that looms over *Washed up on the Potomac* lends a grisly new meaning the show’s title. Nonetheless, it doesn’t meld with Rosen’s other interests in the right fashion. At least in this abbreviated version, the violence (unlike the violence in *Jerry & Tom*) seems oddly isolated from the characters’ private and professional concerns—the kind of thing that can happen to an office drone at random, not because of professional choices.

So maybe the right thing to do with more serious matters is, well, just send them up. That’s what Aaron Sorkin’s *Hidden in This Picture* does. This one-act finds a young director named Robert (Joseph Wycoff, delightfully pompous) organizing the final, panoramic sunset sequence of a Hollywood war epic—a do-or-die live shot that, about halfway through, is interrupted by three cows. Sorkin’s script does get off to a slow start. But once the crisis strikes—and once Robert and his screenwriter buddy Jeff (Garrett Neergaard) start trying to reassure themselves with all manner of “Yale Drama School”

mumbo-jumbo—the play hits one antic high after another. The fact that this is acted out against elegant rustic backdrop (compliments of scenic designer Neil Patel) only makes it more ridiculous. And this combination also—if you’ll allow me a Yale Drama School interpretive stretch of my own—seems a little like an emblem of how *Working It Out* works best. The strivings toward seriousness in the background. The humor front and center.