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'Working it Out' at Center Stage Play includes excerpts from three pieces about the workplace



Luke Robertson stars in "Working It Out" at Center Stage through March 28. (Photo courtesy Center Stage / March 10, 2010)

By Tim Smith | tim.smith@baltson.com Baltimore Sun reporter

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On paper, Center Stage's new venture, "Working It Out," looked like it would take a fresh, zingy look at the workplace...

Substantial excerpts from three pieces -- "Jerry and Tom" by Rick Cleveland, whose credits include such TV gems as "Mad Men" and "Six Feet Under"...

If, as parts of one play fade in and out of another, a sturdy connective thread emerged, a fully consistent theme that pulled things more or less together...

That this collision of three separate worlds proceeds in seamless fashion, thanks to Jason Loewith's well-timed direction and Neil Patel's classy, cleverly adaptable scenic design...

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Filling up the lion's share of the production is "Jerry and Tom." The title characters are just a couple of working class guys who master a slightly off-beat profession -- hit man -- and manage to retain wholesome family values in the process.

Cleveland's Chicago-centered black **comedy** hits its targets easily. He may not be the first writer to make matter-of-fact killers oddly funny, but he certainly knows how to do it with a wicked little twist of the knife. It's not tough to see where he's going with his plot, though, and **the F-word**-larded dialogue starts to sound rather forced after a while.

Vasili Bogazianos gives a note-perfect performance as the long-experienced executioner Tom, who wouldn't think of switching jobs to, say, real estate -- "too [freaking] cutthroat for me." Luke

Robertson is effective as the nervous, determined Jerry. John Ramsey puts a distinctive spin on multiple roles, especially Vic, the mobster with a "grassy knoll" in his past and a terrible toupee on his head.

"Hidden in This Picture," inspired by a story about the making of the **Alan Alda**-directed "Sweet Liberty," takes place in an outdoor workplace, an upstate New York farm area that, somehow, is supposed to suggest Guam in a war movie. A determined director named Robert waits for his last, great shot, which he has painstakingly rehearsed and precisely timed to a sunset so that nothing could go wrong.

It's an amusing set-up, and Sorkin shoots some telling arrows at the movie biz, the struggle between art ("Yale **Drama** crap") and costs, etc. The chunk of his play included here has such a frantic energy and wry dialogue that you can almost feel the actors wishing they could sink their chops into the full play.

Joseph Wycoff has quite a romp as Robert. His nicely nuanced portrayal is matched by Garrett Neergaard's as the screenwriter Jeff. Ramsey (Reuben) and Amy Hohn (Christine) provide colorful supporting work.

Hohn also gives an assured performance as Ruth, one of the quirky proofreaders who live with the threat of staff reductions and the nagging memory of a missing employee in "Washed Up on the Potomac," the one play in this hodgepodge that offers a traditional work environment. Neergaard, as Carl, is a lively presence. Katie Jefferies gets good mileage from the role of vapid Tina.

Rosen's dialogue has some amusing, oddball flourishes that wouldn't be out of place on "The Office." And, at a time when a stubborn recession keeps nipping and ripping at our heels, there's certainly extra resonance in the scenes involving the upper management type, Deb (Kate Buddeke), who has a particularly creepy way of bearing bad news. But the plot doesn't really go anywhere interesting, despite a side trip to peek at a possible crime.

In the end, for all of the stylish acting and visual appeal of the production, the payoff in humor and insight is pretty slim. And for all of the potential in the basic concept behind the show, it feels as if someone, somewhere just never got it worked out all the way.

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