

EstroGenius Festival 2007

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Week 1 - Reviewed by Kat Chamberlain



"Altared State" is an intriguing theme and a clever play-on-words for a night of one-act plays which opens the first week of the EstroGenius Festival. How each of the shows utilizes the same altar in a different way in its set is alone almost worth the price of admission. But that is only the tip of the impressive iceberg at this eighth annual "celebration of female voices." **I was treated to five entirely different, yet altogether exceptional, works that were emotionally satisfying**—a state that I was more than happy to be put into.

The night starts, interestingly enough, with *Swan Song* by Andrew Frank and Doug Silver. This is a simple exchange between an old stage actor whose days have long past him (except in his mind), and his niece, who is his only family staying on to take care of him. It is full of stirring songs that could break your heart. Both James Lawson as an old theatre "god" who has descended into a self-centered mortal of nobody, and Shoshanna Richman as a soft-hearted woman feeling trapped by her very heart, are dazzling.

What could follow *Swan Song*, if not *The End*? Shoshona Currier's piece uses a reality show as the platform for examining one's ambition versus the need for love. The energy is palpable among four contestants vying for "the prize" in a container that will only be revealed when the ultimate winner is produced. Does human desire cling to the possibility of two birds in the bush more than the one already in the hand? The show suffers somewhat from our familiarity with the reality show genre, and its ending can use some boost, but the premise is thought-provoking and promising.

The Wedding (re)Gift by Jennifer Thatcher features newlyweds going through their first argument of the rest of their life together—if they can find some way to accept their considerable differences. It's funny and tender. The pitfall of sinking into a million wedding clichés is shrewdly dodged. It is perhaps the most enjoyable piece of the night.

The couple theme continues into the future. *The Cure for Panacea* by Laura Schlachtmeyer sends us to a clinic that dispenses pills with automated instructions to couples, in place of traditional counseling. Two couples and one lone woman who come to this "no staff" service start talking and essentially host their own group therapy session. Their relationship is ill, but what is the cure? What do you do if your diagnosis is "38% chance of divorce"? How about 67%? I appreciated that the piece shows the dynamics of these relationships without making judgments.

We go even further into the future in *After People* by Fiona Jones, to a world where machines make and break people and history is demarcated not by year but a number of "system failures." Set designers Amber Estes and Mhari Sandoval deserve special mention for making the world vividly real; not a small feat on a relatively simple stage. The language has a Shakespearean ring to it, and the ambition nearly so. Men are obsolete and have become "purely mythical," and the doom is closing in if the machine is not fixed in time. The cavelike dwelling is constantly filled with the haunting chant of one of the women, living mostly in her own world: "Light without machines would be nice..." The whole atmosphere is frantic and mysterious, and the experience wondrous.

I came away with an amazement of how accomplished this particular festival is. The quality of the shows can rival most off-off-Broadway offerings. The state of the festival shows has clearly been altered to an ever fantastic level. I eagerly await the weeks to follow.