

# OFF BROADWAY

Not Your Grandma's Theatre

## The 2007 EstroGenius Festival

### Week Three

Theatre Reviews by [Cindy Pierre](#)

*The Eighth Annual EstroGenius Festival is anchored by four rotating programs of short plays. The short play performances are at 8:00 pm Wednesdays through Fridays and at 7:00 pm and 9:30 pm on Saturdays, through October 13 at Manhattan Theatre Source.*

### **The Body Washer**

An African-American female member of the National Guard, an Iraqi body washer, and a Caucasian journalist reflect on the killings in Fallujah in Rosemary Frisino Toohey's *The Body Washer*. Structured as three separate monologues and stories with the violence as the linking undercurrent, *The Body Washer* is as hurried as it is standoffish. There are no pauses between the monologues for digestion, and only Mara (a solemn Rasha Zamamiri), the body washer of the title, makes a strong impact both in script and performance. Like a mortician, Mara meditates on the cause of death of a cadaver on stage, prepping the deceased for her meeting with Allah with spices and a thorough cleansing. She is the central character, and arguably, the only necessary one. As Nikki the soldier, Joane Cajuste is comfortable with projecting her voice and with her combat posture, but her performance is unnatural and too showy. Reporter Amy's (Amy Forney) dialog is too chock full of facts to have a theatrical impact, and of the three, she is underused.

Although various perspectives are presented, the variance in the cast's ethnicities does not extend past their accents. Their views are not specific to their race. Rather, it is their jobs that sculpt their outlook. The message, however, is clear: the violence in Fallujah is senseless and gaining momentum, and not one person can go unscathed. It is a powerful message, further amplified by the haunting wails of sorrow that usher in and close the show.

### **Please Remove This Stuffed Animal From My Head**

In a female-dominated society, Men lose control of their right to choose in the abortion allegory, *Please Remove This Stuffed Animal From My Head* by Crystal Jackson. In it, men wear stuffed animal headbands as a visual for the baby comparison to hilarious effect. There is overt as well as dry humor, particularly in the hands of stuffed animal removal practitioners Jerry (Brian Karim) and Phil (Mark Adamsbaum). When Man (Nick Arens) decides to remove the cute stuffed lion from his head, he is subjected to a series of questions about his motives and his character. They counsel him vehemently against this life-threatening procedure, urging him to consider the consequences that he has already accepted by the time he visits them. And when they realize that they cannot

sway him, they bring in Woman (Amy Lee Pearsall, sounding eerily like Holly Hunter), their boss for the final say.

The commitment of the actors to this piece elevates it to a wonderfully engaging level. In general, the cast excels at the abortion innuendos, and Mark Adamsbaum is specifically effective as the complacent Phil. However, with all of the outrageous criteria and prerequisites for removal, *Please Remove This Stuffed Animal From My Head* could easily be misinterpreted as a bizarre comedy rather than the rich metaphor for the plights of a pregnant woman that it is. Also, based on the visuals, it would appear that pregnancy is constant in this world and a condition that all men share at the same time. It is an extreme notion, but perhaps that is the very point that Jackson aims to get across. Perhaps to remove or not to remove is that much of a quandary, either literally or figuratively. Nevertheless, this clever play begs for and grabs your attention.

### **Crossing Over**

The Greek myth of Philomela and Procne, two sisters united against a sadistic husband, gets an African-American twist in Natalia Naman's *Crossing Over*. This powerful retelling of the tragedy is feverish and tense, as well as bold and provocative. With choreographed movements that are risky in the Manhattan Theatre Source's small space but visually arresting, director Mary E. Hodges draws passion from her cast. Part spoken word, part chorus, *Crossing Over* is a look at kinship at its strongest.

When Procne (an outstanding Meagan Pahl) invites her sister Philomela (Chandra Thomas) over for a visit to the home that she shares with her husband Tereus (Tarantino Smith), she never imagines the choices that she will have to make regarding her marriage and her family. Already feeling caged by her vows, Procne invites Philomela to lift her spirits, but it is Procne that winds up redeeming Philomela when Tereus savagely rapes her. To prevent Itys, their son, from carrying his father's evil traits, Procne drowns him and then exacts her revenge on Terseus. The cast uses staffs in their calculated movements as narrative tools and weapons to great effect. *Crossing Over* is a battle of wills as much as it is a physical one, and their blood-stained white costumes are a testament to the latter. Loosely based on a tale told by numerous storytellers such as Ovid and Sophocles, *Crossing Over* holds true to the core of the legend, with Naman's own embellishments. It is jolting and strong, and carries a deep impact.

### **In Dog Years**

A young lesbian couple decide to get a dog in T.D. Mitchell's *In Dog Years*. Expertly directed by Rosalie Purvis, the dominance and submission elements in this play cannot be denied, both in the rearing of the couple's dog, Martina Navratilova, and the grooming in their relationship. Alex (Marinda Anderson) and Sean (Ivory Aquino) decide to take the next step in their relationship by getting a canine, but they don't see eye-to-eye on the connotations. While Sean is busy trying to tame Alex's cheating ways with a puppy, Alex has other ideas. It isn't until Martina is injured that the couple takes a serious look at the dynamics of their relationship and its future.

The parallels between having a dog and having a baby are established immediately in *In Dog Years*. Like a baby in some unions, the dog is brought in as a way to smooth over their problems. Instead, she becomes the scapegoat for ruining their relationship. The material is great fun for the wonderful actors, allowing them the opportunity to whimper, pant, and assume four-legged positions. The collars and leashes provide an excellent illustration of how humans conduct themselves in order to get their partners to cooperate with their desires. I couldn't help but wonder if the play was written with a specific gender in mind. Although it works exceptionally well with women, it could have easily been about a male Alex and Sean. *In Dog Years* is an allegory for the failures of obedience training, and the most developed and successful of this week's series. Yet, unlike a dog, sometimes positive reinforcements are not enough for a person to do tricks like stay and roll over.

### **Rumple Schmumple**

Montserrat Mendez by way of *Saturday Night Live*'s Chris Kattan is Rumpelstiltskin in Megan Gogerty's feminist spin on the Brothers Grimm story in *Rumple Schmumple*. A Queen (Medina Senghore) racks her brain to figure out Rumpelstiltskin's name, but to no avail. Frustrated and annoyed with his reluctance to tell her, the Queen decides to liberate herself in another way by entrusting her new baby in his care. She longs to return to the days when her nights were restful and her days were not pre-determined. Crafty and resilient and not really interested in taking on her tiny charge, Rumpelstiltskin toys with her mind and heart to get her to reconsider.

Mitchell takes great liberties with the original story, but her vision is a creative and original one. Unlike the original *Rumpelstiltskin*, this dwarf does not immediately exercise his right over the Queen's child. He instead makes her earn the right to call herself the child's mother. An allegory for adoptive and birth mother rights, *Rumple Schmumple* has good production elements, with lighting and sound bending to the snap of Rumpelstiltskin's fingers. It is light and humorous, and sneaks in the messages about giving up parental rights amid the laughs. And for this play, gentle instruction is the right way to instill values and sensitivities.

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### **The 2007 EstroGenius Festival**

*Through October 13*

Manhattan Theatre Source, 177 MacDougal Street between 5th and 6th Avenues, off of 8th Street

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