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Entertainment & Life

Theater review | [PORTO]: Humor and character out weigh preoccupations with consumer culture and global economy

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Just getting a few drinks and something to nibble on at a New York bar means navigating surprisingly complicated questions about what we eat and who we meet in [PORTO].

Intriguing and amusing but also meandering, Kate Benson's episodic romantic/philosophical comedy receives a stylish area premiere by Available Light Theatre as its 2018-2019 season-opener.

Director Eleni Papaleonardos maintains a light touch while highlighting the play's hints of emotional and philosophical depths – not that much deeper, really, than the relationships and issues that animated the bar regulars in the classic TV series “Cheers.”

Whereas that Boston bar became emblematic because “everybody knows your name” there, the [PORTO] millennial-generation bar hipsters only know each other via nicknames inspired by their favorite drinks.

At Friday's performance in the Riffe Center, the eight-member cast smoothly embraced the play's whimsical rhythms while finding sweet and faintly lost personality in largely underwritten roles.

Michelle Weiser is likable and believable as Porto, a savvy young woman open to dating a guy but largely comfortable with her sidekick status as friend to Elena Perantoni's more attractive (and frequently falling-down-drunk) Dry Sac.

Jason Kientz projects an easygoing and deferential masculinity as Hennepin, a bar regular who eventually reveals signs of interest in both women.

Brian Gray and Adam Humphrey are effective and versatile in double roles, which begin with their respective jobs as the cool bartender and solicitous waiter.

Kara Jobe and Dakota Thorn have fun and spark laughter as the wide-eyed Chorus of Dumb Bunnies, who haunt and torment Porto as the fantasy embodiment of her least-mature impulses.

The most intriguing character remains largely unseen, but vividly heard through her protean voice. Epiphany Pope is marvelous as the droll and opinionated narrator, whose omniscient inner-character monologues and arguments give the play much of its quirky presence.

One can enjoy the humor and character in this collage piece without agreeing with the playwright's anxious preoccupations with consumer culture and the global economy.

Such editorials - about the growing of pigs or the making of sausage - can feel extraneous and un-integrated into the play, yet they inspire some of Benson's most vivid, poetic and pungent dialogue.

The 85-minute one-act, suggested for mature audiences because of profanity and offstage sex, ultimately proves most fascinating for the theatricality of its inner monologues, which reveal so much about the anxieties, and musings of different characters.

The environmental production comfortably nestles into the Studio One Theatre like as an attractive pop-up bar, realistically but artfully designed by Brad Steinmetz under Carrie Cox's subdued bar lighting.

The audience, able to choose between seating at front bar tables or in the regular theater seats, should sit as close as possible to the stage to maximize the production's you-are-there intimacy.

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