

Review: Alaska Overnighters makes for intoxicating night of theater

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Watching Alaska Overnighters 10 is like examining one of those science lab models of the human body. One half shows you the outside of a human body; the other half is sliced open for a glimpse at how everything works.

At the theatrical quick draw that is Overnighters, the unpolished format allows the audience to see complete one-act plays and to feel like theater insiders for a night, like a part of the creation process. The effect is intoxicating.

This Overnighters' theme of the Ten Commandments led to a generally hilarious Saturday evening program at Wendy Williamson Auditorium, which hummed with the type of energy only felt when about 50 creative types have been fueled entirely on Starbucks and adrenaline for the past 24 hours.

Here are mini-reviews in the same manner the plays were delivered: Short, fast and meaty.

"Who's Your God Now?" by Adam Warwas

Commandment: Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

Synopsis: Melvin and Evah Jones are a walking "American Gothic" couple, complete with pitchfork. Unfortunately, their teenage son doesn't share their Heartland-grown meekness and piety. Enter The God Whisperer, a smarmy FOX-TV host determined to shake the Green Day right out of this high school atheist.

Reaction: For a 12-hour script, Warwas' one-liners alone (including an homage to Ted Stevens' "series of tubes") exceed expectations. But the writer also managed to slip in some considerable points about hypocrisy in religious leadership, media sleaze and generation gaps. He gets my vote for MVP playwright of the night.

"The Talkeetna Chainsaw Massacre" by Linda Billington

Commandment: Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Synopsis: Average Joes Larry and Jake rent a room in Talkeetna, planning to meet up with jailbait Tina and Cheri. But one of their wives has tracked them down, and brought Tina's ex-boyfriend Mike, a chainsaw "artist" who just got out of prison.

Reaction: Billington made up for some thin dialogue early on with a cheeky plot, fun twists, and a killer last line. As Mike, Todd Glidewell delivered berserk chainsaw antics and one of the most glorious mullets to ever grace a stage. But maybe "glorious" and "mullet" are redundant.

"#5 Closest to God – But Not about Him" by Ann Reddig

Commandment: Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother.

Synopsis: The only pure drama of the night, this play about teens dealing with death has an M. Night Shyamalan aura.

Reaction: Although there isn't much time at Overnighters for the audience to develop an attachment to characters, Reddig managed to effectively build the emotional content for a brief, yet poignant, piece.

"The Last Freaks Out Egypt" by Arlitia Jones

Commandment: Thou shalt not bear false witness.

Synopsis: An absurdist play with a carnival cast that includes Bearded Lady and Mute Boy With Flipper Feet. In the midst of an exodus from Egypt, the freaks delay a traveler, tempting her with a chest that may hold the key to God's identity.

Reaction: Jones creates a beautiful atmosphere of surreal mystery, with visuals intriguing enough for French film. The play's concept was slightly complex and opaque for the 20-minute window, and so couldn't effectively convey much thematically. But it did provide thorough suspension of disbelief, great sight gags, and a magical final moment. Props to the props master Bill Cotton, who in 12 hours managed to hunt down a carousel-style duck chariot, a life-sized wooden tiger cutout, a chainsaw, a pitchfork and other similarly bizarre requests.

"Sabbatron" by Schatzie Schaefer

Commandment: Thou shalt remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

Synopsis: Tensions in a mixed-religion marriage come to a head when a salesman and his wife hawk the "Sabbath 9000" – a machine that could be a godsend, or could compromise Jewish observances.

Reaction: As a coke-head saleslady, Dana Fahmey delivered one of the most memorable performances of the night, alternately channeling a frantic Carol Burnett and a languid, mumbling Madeline Kahn. Overall, this is a clever and humorous look at how religious and non-religious people can meet in the middle.

How Overnighters works: Local playwrights get a topic at 8 p.m. and have until 8 a.m. the next morning to turn in a 10-20 minute play. Then, the cast and crew have 12 hours before they stage the play for an audience.

Alaska Overnighters has been presented by Three Wise Moose and TBA Theatre for the past five years. In that time, 30 different local playwrights have premiered 70 new plays.

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