

Hedy Weiss

Collaboration's 'Program B' beguiling, a bit uneven

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BY [HEDY WEISS](#) Theater Critic

Though Collaboration's "Sketchbook: Program B" lacks the consistent strength of "Program A," the eight dramatic experiments comprising this second installment of the company's hip and ingenious showcase of 16 short new works is still worth a visit.

In fact, there is interest in just watching the project's crew of young, enthusiastic techies as they reconfigure the plywood crates and all-important "original visual art elements" that form the backdrop for each work. What's more, the sheer range of styles on view -- from mini-opera and political satire to theater of the absurd -- is enough reason to check it out.

Among the best of the eight pieces is "Laika's Coffin: A Suitcase Opera." A brief, rueful tale set at the dawn of Cold War era space exploration, it tells of a plot by nasty Soviet apparatchiks to kidnap Laika, an old lady's dog, and send the poor pooch on a mission that will shorten its life, yet give it a unique view of the universe. With an edgy score by Seth Bockley and Kevin O'Donnell, direction by Redmoon Theater's masterful Frank Maugeri, and beguiling Russian Constructivist-meets-Soviet-style puppet design by Angela Tillges, Justin Hart and others, the work has hints of Gogol, Brecht and more.

And the trio of foldout suitcase "stages" combine with the vivid work of live actor-singers (Alex Balistreri, Brandon Campbell, Cynthia Castiglione and Matthew Parker) to create a terrific finale to the evening.

THEATER REVIEW

'COLLABORATION'S SKETCHBOOK: PROGRAM B' RECOMMENDED

When: Running in rotating repertory with Program A through Aug. 27
Where: Collaboration at Chopin Theatre, 1543 W. Division
Tickets: \$30 (or \$50-70 for passes to the two programs)
Phone: (312) 226-9633

Aaron Carter's "Keeger," a histrionic vet blackly powerful scene of a soldier (Bob Turton) who goes berserk in the midst of explosive warfare is a

neat counterpoint to "Young Wives," Stephen Cone's stunning comment on the homefront in "Program A." Actor Lance Baker has turned cinematic director here, with artist Robert Burnier supplying 16 richly atmospheric canvases that rise slowly to evoke the smoke-and-fire landscapes of war.

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In a far lighter vein, there is Ellen Fairey's "Chill Is Good," a charming little monologue for a sweet, self-aware teenage boy on a skateboard. Josh (played by the wholly engaging Zach Gray, a former child actor who has truly come into his own) is obsessed with a sexy Lithuanian girl, Minka. But he is determined to maintain a veneer of cool by way of Zen-like deep breathing -- a bit of semi-chill in the face of adolescent lust.

The characters in Brian Golden's "Fragments" -- the anatomy of a relationship on the rocks -- are far beyond deep-breathing. Glimpsed at the breakfast table, He (Sean Neely) is in a state of boorish oblivion, while She (Cassandra Bissell, in a superb performance) is in the throes of a full meltdown. Flashbacks to their early dating days suggest things were not all that different at the start, though She did a good job of fooling herself. Golden's writing and Amanda Delheimer's stark direction are both top-notch.

The audience's laughter at Doug Wilkinson-Gray's pitch black "Hey, I Didn't Kill My Girlfriend" frankly threw me for a loop. Clearly inspired by such cold-blooded "wife/girlfriend killers" as Scott Peterson and the rest, this playlet looks at the bizarre detachment of a boyfriend (Brennan Buhl) who plays wholly dumb as investigators case his apartment while he sits beside the bloody corpse of his girlfriend (Lacy Coil).

In Theresa Rebeck's clipped and timely "How We Get to Where We're Going," we listen in on a debate between presidential speechwriters (well-played by Mike MacNamara and Aaron Weiner) who have very different takes on the crises of the modern world. No specifics are spoken, yet we know exactly what is being discussed. Rebeck, co-author of the spiky "Omnium Gatherum," is a skillful provocateur.

Scott Barsotti also plays on the current state of global affairs. But his "Burrowing Anxiety" (with Rob Belushi, Noah Simon, Greta Honold and Kirk Nortridge directed by Jeremy Wechsler) is a too-obvious commentary on how the world is going to hell in a handbasket while some just plug into their headphones.

In Brett Neveu's "The Octopus Story," "orchestrated" by Alison Daigle, a crowd of subway commuters plug into their own take on strange and at times terrifying octopus dreams. A metaphor for our current state of both real and amorphous fears? Perhaps. Or maybe just an experiment for a cacophony of voices.

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