

STAGE REVIEW

An absorbing search in ‘Ugmo and Eenie’

By Don Aucoin | GLOBE STAFF JUNE 13, 2014



Johnny Blazes.

The artistic partnership between playwright-director Kenneth Prestininzi and the fringe theater company Sleeping Weazel once again pays dividends with “Ugmo and Eenie Go Down the Ruski Hole.”

Prestininzi’s new play examines the hazy line between performance and what we call real life as it tracks the attempts by two gay men to connect, if only they can fight their way past the masks and fears and uncertainty that have locked each of them in very different kinds of solitude.

Anyone who saw Prestininzi’s borderline-brilliant “Birth Breath Bride Elizabeth” last year — a solo show starring Stephanie Burlington Daniels presented by Sleeping Weazel at ArtsEmerson — is familiar with his decidedly nonlinear, conceptual style and his fondness for riddling allusions. It takes some getting used to, and “Ugmo and Eenie Go Down the Ruski Hole” drifts perilously close to self-indulgence at times.

But as the play finds its footing, “Ugmo” steadily draws you in and its rewards begin to multiply.

Chief among those rewards is the indelible performance by Leicester Landon as Ugmo, a performance artist rehearsing his solo show in a chaotic one-room basement apartment in Chicago.

Throughout the play, the barefoot Landon is a perpetual motion machine: crawling, bounding to his feet, capering across the stage, leaping in and out of a square Ugmo has drawn on the floor as if to test his capacity for freedom, striking dramatic poses as the character blithely tosses off remarks like “Pleasure is a porcupine you’ve mistaken for your teddy” and “I don’t want an audience; it’s just that I need to know that I could delight one if I got one.”

(“Ugmo and Eenie Go Down the Ruski Hole,” which shares a bill with a drag performance by Johnny Blazes, was timed by Sleeping Weazel to coincide with Boston Pride Week. The evening kicks off the company’s “Doubles, Demons and Dreamers” festival, the second phase of which will take place June 19-21 and will feature performances of “Lava Fossil,” created and performed by Beth Nixon, and “Talk To At Me,” written by Adara Meyers.)

There’s no bed in Ugmo’s apartment, though it does contain a shopping cart. When we first see Ugmo, he is emerging from a cardboard box. His apartment (the set design is by Emily Woods and Kelly Smith) is strewn with balled-up pieces of paper. Not since SpeakEasy Stage Company’s production of Samuel D. Hunter’s “The Whale” has a Boston stage been such a festival of clutter.

Cowering one moment, swaggering the next, Ugmo exists in a kind of self-imposed solitary confinement. The theater piece he’s working on is built on the reverberations between his own life and that of the protagonist in Dostoevsky’s “Notes from Underground.” (Landon is very funny when he slides into a Russian accent.) As with Dostoevsky’s Underground Man, Ugmo is a study in alienation, wholly estranged from the wider world. Only the persistent pounding on the floor by an upstairs neighbor provides evidence there is life outside Ugmo’s apartment.

That neighbor turns out to be Eenie, real name Ernie, portrayed by Alston Brown. We’ve seen him early in the play, dressed in drag, wearily returning home after what was apparently an unsatisfying night out. Eenie is determined to change his life: He has enlisted in the military so he can eventually afford to attend design school.

Brown does a fine job as Eenie, capturing the hidden depths of a character who at first seems to be an open book. But it is Landon who compels the audience’s attention. He portrays Ugmo as if the character is in the grip of a fever that could either break or worsen at any moment.

There’s a blend of open sensuality and unknowable ambiguity to Landon’s Ugmo as he and Eenie engage in a dance of attraction and evasion. Eenie doesn’t always know when Ugmo is acting and when he’s putting Eenie on – and neither does the audience.

When Ugmo says, “If two men fall in love, they should say so,” does he believe it? By the end of this absorbing and touching play, the answer to that question, at least, is clear.

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