

Arts & Entertainment

Stage version of Talk Radio holds mirror to society

Talk Radio
Citadel Rice Theatre
through February 19

review by Kevin Law

Half the world does not know how the other half lives said Rabelais. More to the point, few know the darkest thoughts of the neurotic lost souls that exist in society.

Barry Champlain knows. As acrimonious host of a late night talk back radio show, he nightly plumbs the seedy depths of America's manic underbelly.

The current Citadel Rice production of *Talk Radio* is an intense and fascinating play of words and feelings set in the bunker-like studio of a radio station in Cleveland, Ohio. The play's format is initially unfamiliar as the drama unfolds in the real time of Barry Champlain's radio program. But the hard cynicism of John Wright's performance in the leading role, coupled with the superb interaction between Wright and the live actors that serve as callers, draws the viewer into the disturbing circus of Champlain's world.

The one major annoyance of the play is the exceedingly loud and harshly distorted sound system that conveys the caller's voices to the audience. However, the contrasting personalities exhibited by each caller's voice and tone are effective; the disembodied vociferations of their screwed up souls powerfully reveals the eccentric and sometimes frightening thoughts of society's fringe. Wright convinces as the host who deals with his callers in a cynical, often cruel manner. He loves to toy with them, fatten them up like calves, then chew them up and spit them out.

Fortunately, playwright Eric Bogosian allows the audience a more objective glimpse of the man behind the microphone through monologues by a couple of Champlain's closest working associates. James Downing as Barry's friend Stu, the technician who screens calls, delivers a nice turn about idyllic hippy days of times past. Ti Hallas as Linda, the somewhat ditzzy studio assistant, is a character role that is too stereotyped as dumb and promiscuous, yet her monologue also helps reveal a deeper part of Barry's temperament. "Barry," she says, "is a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there."

The drama itself is not all visceral. A paradox exists in the symbiotic relationship between Barry and his callers. They need each other, and the barrier of never having to physically confront one another allows them both to flaunt their darkest sides. The play's end removes the barrier, however, forcing Barry to confront his demi-god persona. His face to face confrontation with a vacuous punk named Kent (capriciously played by William MacDonald) reveals the real horrors of the mind inherent in the tragic lives of those from the underbelly.

The play may seem anticlimatic upon actual viewing, as Barry, shaken, frustrated, finishes the show, soon to return to a program that will become nationally broadcast. But questions open up about people living lonely, brutal, or sad lives, and the play offers no solutions.

Perhaps Barry's self realization allows him to admit he perpetuates the tragic by merely exposing it, for the callers in *Talk Radio* not only rant about the state of the world, they are the state of the world.



Talk Radio at the Citadel

The cast of the Citadel Rice Theatre's current production, *Talk Radio* gather around Barry Champlain (John Wright). The play shows the state of the world through the characters who phone in to Champlain's show to complain about their lives. They appear in Thursday's Gateway.

Hunting Cockroaches shouldn't bug you much

Hunting Cockroaches
Phoenix at the Kaasa
through February 12

review by P.J. Groeneveldt

Nothing is a time for *Hunting Cockroaches*. They scutter out of corners in the dark, only to disappear when a light is flicked on. Here comes a big one out from under the bed. Hey! It looks like a KGB officer. Hit him with a shoe!

Janusz Glowacki's play, translated from the Polish by Jadwig Kosicka, probably won't fit everyone's preconceived notions of comedy. Neither is it easily classified as drama. The press releases tout it as a "black comedy," but it's not very black. It

is primarily autobiographical material played for laughs.

Jan and Anka have not slept for months. Neither one is working, and they are far behind on the rent. She wants a baby, but he doesn't find that a good idea.

Jan (David Mann) is a worried man. He can't sleep because his head is echoing with bad memories of his past and terrified visions of his future. His wife Anka (Maralyn Ryan) is in the same state. They lay in their bed discussing the troubles they had getting into New York and then turn the light out for the first of several times that evening to try to sleep. An immigration official (Blair Haynes) pops out from under the bed, and Jan and Anka relive their experiences at Ellis Island. He asks them if they've been treated for

venereal diseases, precipitating an argument on whether or not crabs are considered a venereal disease. He asks them if they plan to murder the President and Anka wonders if a potential assassin would give a truthful answer.

The pair try to sleep again. This time Anka worries that they will end up "in the park with the homeless." She turns on the light again, to find a bum (Richard Gishler) emerging from under the box spring. In this very funny scene, the bum recognizes nearly all of Jan and Anka's furniture and can name the street corner each piece was found at. He sits on their black and white television set exclaiming his happiness that his seat has been found.

Jan and Anka's furniture guilt-fest turns to a righteously indignant mood when Mr. and Mrs. Thompson (Gishler and Anne McGrath) crawl into the light, dressed in

croons Anka. "Where would we put it," grumbles Jan). Jan points out that cockroaches run away when you turn the light on. The bigger ones run faster; the smaller ones run slower. Anka cries piteously, "They are just babies," and winks lewdly at him.

The show, directed by Jim Guedo, is true to its nature. The portrayal of the difficulties of anyone new to a culture attempting to succeed in art is one of the things the play communicates, whether intentionally or not.

David Skelton, the set designer, has found a new and interesting way to portray

He asks them if they plan to murder the President...



David Mann and Maralyn Ryan as the immigrant couple in the Phoenix Theatre's production of *Hunting Cockroaches*. They spend most of the play in bed.

Paul Menzies

...cockroaches run away when you turn the light on.

their finest visiting togs. Mr. Thompson believes that connections in high places can help anyone and Mrs. Thompson believes, as do many, that the English language is more easily understood at high volume.

The couple drop a few names — and some warm blankets — and vanish under the bed once more.

The play carries on in much the same mode. The emigres try to sleep, seize upon one facet of their multi-coloured past and have a nightmarish vision of it for the audience. These sequences are interrupted by touching scenes in which the couple pray for green cards or argue the points for and against having a baby ("A baby,"

squalor. The apartment is not seen as a fully conscious person would see it, but rather as someone who has not slept for a month might see it.

Audiences will delight in Anka's acceptance of her too-strong accent and her subsequent decision to become a stand-up comic rather than continue in her career as a Shakespearean actor.

Hunting Cockroaches may not be as hilarious as the hype would have us believe, so it should not be seen with this notion in mind. If you go in with an open mind, you probably won't be disappointed, but remember that it was not written by a sitcom writer.

