



Mason West for the Emerald

Joe VonAppen recounts a glue-induced vision of being led through forests of velvet leaves and velour grass on the way to heaven.

Playhouse swears at God

■ 'Swearing at God' opens in the Playhouse today as a showcase for Joe VonAppen, though he falls a little short



Pocket Playhouse
'Swearing at God'

★★★☆☆

By Mason West
for the Emerald

As the end of the 2000-01 Pocket Playhouse season approaches, Joe VonAppen asks, "What does it all mean?" This crucial question is what centers his self-written, self-directed one-man show, "Swearing at God," which opens in the Pocket today at 5 p.m.

The play is a series of monologues that VonAppen appropriately calls "schizophrenic," but all the characters are struggling to find meaning in their existence. As the title suggests, the play does deal with some heavenly aspects, but it is by no means religious or religiously offensive. "God" is really just an entity to whom we address life's big question.

VonAppen assumes all people are searching for meaning in life,

but he theorizes that all people actually experience it at some point. However, the experience is too brief for them to comprehend the meaning. Thus, people replace the question "what does it mean?" with "what the fuck?"

Basically, the audience is prepped from the beginning to understand the end of the show. VonAppen, wisely, doesn't offer any answers to his questions; all the characters come up short. While this leaves audiences a little unfulfilled, it is much better than VonAppen trying to propose some meaningful answer that is complete crap. Expecting one man to resolve the human condition causes theater to be pretentious.

While VonAppen stays humble, his schtick gets old. Anyone who spends an hour and a half vocally questioning existence is bound to seem cranky. He holds out longer than you might expect by taking humorous approaches to asking the question. His first search is made by a wannabe gangster taking night classes in foreign languages — he has already mastered the four-letter dialect of English. The endeavor is to find the language God spoke in during a vision induced by huffing glue. This is perhaps the funniest of the monologues and contributes to the disappointment in later aspects of the play.

In contrast to the rapid-fire slang spouted by "homie" Joe, VonApp-

pen later becomes more reserved as a scorned ventriloquist whose dummy won't speak to him because it has emotional problems and wants to die. Later still, he is "the revolutionary leader of absolutely nothing."

After doing a successful job of balancing humor and melancholy, VonAppen drops the ball with the last two monologues. While he doesn't lead audiences to expect a happy ending, they won't be pleased or satisfied with what is presented. That is the bad side of not having a pretentious answer; there's nothing on which to pass judgment. At least when actors go out on a limb, viewers can leave saying "dude, they are so wrong" and feeling superior. Well, kudos to VonAppen for not giving audiences that chance.

So, what does it all mean? People who will want to attend this play are the same people who watched the film, "Requiem for a Dream"; they aren't looking for answers or emotional pleasure, they just want to experience someone's art. It's unclear whether this show is art; it didn't have Jennifer Connelly in it.

"Swearing at God" plays today and Saturday at 5 p.m. in the Pocket Playhouse in Villard Hall.

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