

CROWDED HOUSE

Eight gay men in a summer cottage for the weekend—fasten your seatbelts, it's going to be a bumpy ride

by Flora Sussely

Love! Valour! Compassion! is Terrence McNally's most recent (1995) Tony Award-winning play. It's not a good gay play, it's a good play, period. McNally believes, and rightly so, that it is no longer enough to write about ourselves. He writes, "[Y]ou can't get away with a bad 'gay' play any more than you can with serving up lousy food in a 'gay' restaurant."

The story follows eight gay men during one

Theater

summer of long weekends: from Memorial Day to Fourth of July to Labor Day. There are our hosts, dancer/choreographer Gregory and his very young, adorable and blind lover, Bobby; and their longtime friends and frequent visitors to the upstate estate, Buzz (a musical comedy aficionado and costume designer); John (a musician, bad composer and malevolent presence); his new 'boy-friend,' Ramon (a young, brilliant, pretty dancer); Arthur and Perry (the 'old married couple'); and later, John's brother, James.

The standout performance in Artists Repertory Theater's production is undoubtedly Michael Mendelson's as John and James. It is the most powerful and poignant performance of the evening. Mendelson literally becomes physically large, menacing and angry as John, then willowy, frail and sweet as James. In what is the most amazing of transformations, he speaks to and then becomes James; going from an icy, broad-shouldered presence to a small, dying reed of a man. He does this before our eyes, in the time it takes to slowly sink into a chair.

The play, while at times heartwrenching, is basically a comedy about truth, about love, friendship, fear, passion. Human themes. Not exclusively gay and yet, because the subtext is impending death, it is about the way our community is living every day, being who we are.

Buzz, played and sometimes overplayed by Duffy Epstein, never stops annotating everything with his beloved musical theater trivia. But he stops, in an oddly familiar moment and says, "Who will be there for me when it's my turn?" That line alone speaks out our constant hidden agenda, but it is in a friend's reply: "We all will," that our community is defined.

Gregory, our host, begins the play passionately describing his old house in the country and ends the play having passionately choreographed the piece he has struggled to complete. He is someone we know. We understand his tenderness, his fear of losing his ability to dance (to age), his lover (to another), his friends (to AIDS). Dwight



Six-sevenths of the cast of ART's *Love! Valour! Compassion!*

Tolar gives us a constant Gregory, a compassionate, forgiving, almost paternal and highly likeable man. His lover, Bobby, played by Nicholas Freeman, turns in a beautiful performance as an innocent young blind man. He gropes a bit too much for a coffee cup or the stairs—the way the truly blind since birth would not—but his performance captures a purity of spirit that calls up in us a protective instinct; he is a part of us from the start.

Don Alder and Grant Byington give a perfectly matched performance as the couple married for 12 years. ("We're role models. It's very stressful.") They both give wonderful renditions of similar yet individual men. And while their 'marriage' is one performance, they give very separate performances as well. Alder is very Spencer Tracy, he freezes over while Byington delivers a wildly angry tirade. But as in all enduring relationships, there is an acceptance of one another. They have not been perfect in their records of fidelity but they are at peace in their

connection, grateful and guilty that they have health and one another.

As an ensemble piece, the opening show was a bit uneven in places. Buzz (Epstein) and Ramon (Andres Alcala) play to a larger house than ART's current space. (ART will have a new, slightly larger home next season). Alcala's finest moments are when he is bound to a chair and must convey anger, curiosity, mockery, without his very pretty body. Likewise it is when Epstein is caring for his failing lover that he is most real. It is the juxtaposition of bravado and intimacy that we identify with; these are people we know.

Director Jon Kretzu and set designer Lawrence Larsen manage to create an entire house, garden, tennis courts, lake, raft and auto, all within inches of each other. One moment we are swimming, the next we are in the stairwell or a closet, and in these imperceptible shifts we follow these men from public to private, from cordial to tormented, from angry to tender.

I think the play's greatness is that, while there are tuts and jokes about things like nocturnal emissions ("always made me think of Chopin"), the story is about people who are committed to their work, their friends, their lives. These men represent the best and the worst of people in general.

At the end of *Love! Valour! Compassion!* we are left feeling a sense of order about life. There is something comforting in knowing that we have been defined, understood, forgiven. It is not that it is a 'happy' ending, not as it is in Buzz's beloved musicals. There is no 'happy' ending. It is simply a truthful ending and that is enough. Because that is life, and life is what this play is about.

Love! Valour! Compassion! runs through July 5 at Artists Repertory Theater, 1111 SW 10th Ave. Tickets are \$18.50-\$23.50 through the ART box office at 294-7373.

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