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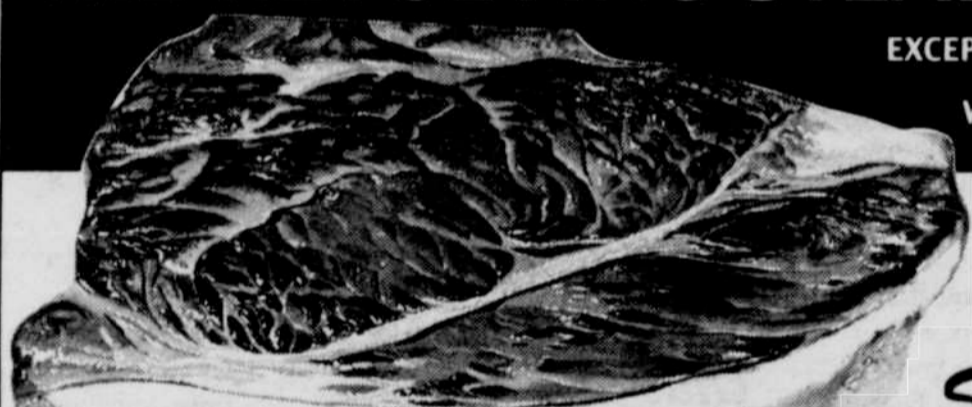


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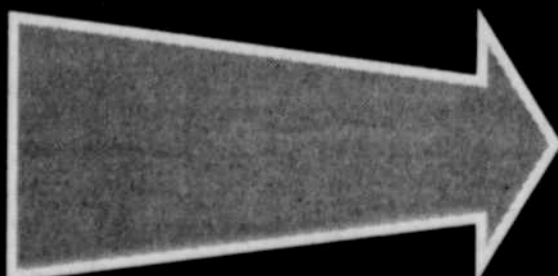


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THEATER

"All of us shop and fuck"

Mark Ravenhill's graphic masterpiece comes alive at Theater! Theatre!

BY GARY MORRIS



Michael Teufel, Val Landrum and Gabe Carleton-Barnes' bum star in *Shopping and Fucking*

Mark Ravenhill doesn't care much for the term "gay" or even "queer." He prefers "post-gay" (as in post-feminist). The phrase makes sense for the British author of an apocalyptic play that could reasonably be seen as "post-theater."

Ravenhill's bibliography is short—just a handful of plays. Pre-eminent among them is *Shopping and Fucking*, which made its debut in front of an audience of a few dozen in 1996. The venue was a throwaway corner of the prestigious Royal Court in London.

Word that the play featured everything from graphic gay sex and nudity to rape, all wrapped in a black-humor package, spread quickly. *Shopping* moved to a more lordly venue, the Gielgud Theatre in the West End, where it enthralled and repelled audiences in about equal measure for six months.

Ravenhill became a cause célèbre, and his most provocative play has been seen around the world, funded by a reluctant British Council Tour. Now Portland audiences get to see what all the fuss was about, courtesy of an excellent-all-round version by triangle productions!

The world of *Shopping* is populated by a few desperate denizens, a quartet of London slackers in various degrees of dysfunction who steal, deal, enter and exit rehab, eat microwaved junk food, engage in rape and murder, and seem to love and hate each other in equal proportion.

Lulu, the play's lone female, is an aspiring actress in red vinyl Dr. Martens and miniskirt whose auditions for an alleged TV producer to sell collectible plates turn into an opportunity to sell drugs.

One of her roommates is Robbie, a speedy bisexual boy who joins her in dealing after their

other roomie (and Robbie's boyfriend), Mark, heads off to rehab to get over a smack addiction. Their tenuous scene slides further toward collapse when a stoned Robbie decides to give away \$6,000 worth of Ecstasy, and he and Lulu are forced to do a weeklong marathon of phone sex to raise the money to pay back the dealer.

Meanwhile, Mark, a combination emotional zombie and emotional wreck, seeks solace with a 14-year-old rent boy, Gary, whose business keeps him flush even as he hurtles toward self-destruction.

On paper this sounds like a grinding grimfest, but the often heavy action is leavened with absurd humor that connects audiences with the characters, even in their most extreme (and occasionally gag-inducing) moments.

Ravenhill is especially adept with over-the-top bits of business. There's a hilarious running gag of Lulu making a huge issue of refusing to share her

pathetic Top Ramen with her roommates, but, typical of these scattered lives, she later becomes violent trying to force said soup on Robbie.

This gag also resonates one of the play's themes—desperate clinging to consumerism by desperate people.

Lulu finds comfort in her soup and defends it in a phrase that might have come from a commercial: "You have all the taste in the world here!"

Mark gets some of the play's most black-comic moments. "I have no definition of myself," he says, and proves it when he comes back from rehab and talks in mindless therapy clichés about the necessity to separate emotional involvement from sex. "Just lick and go" is his self-prescription to the boy-whore he wants to rim.

At the end of a powerful sequence in which Gary reveals he's been raped repeatedly by his mother's boyfriend, who doesn't use a condom,

"I get quite a lot of laughs at moments that are excruciating for me, personally. I wonder if it's the script or is it me squirming—or a marriage of the two?"

—Michael Teufel