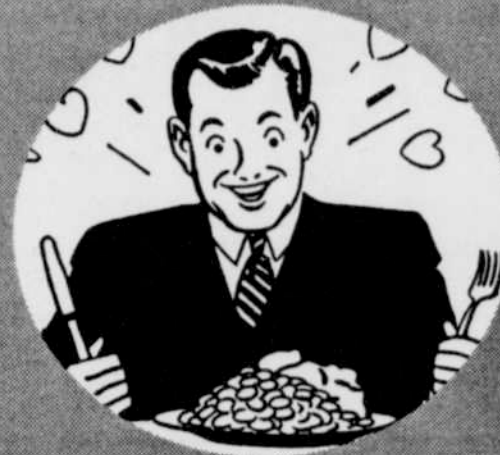


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TREAT YOURSELF



NICHOLAS... AB... OLSON

Mark seeks solace in teen-age rent boy Gary

just spit, Mark doesn't seem to notice Gary's extreme pain and is mesmerized by the details: "Does he spit up you?" Mark's extended anecdote about meeting Fergie in a men's restroom is one of the show's high points.

Brian, the drug dealer, hovers over these wretches like an authoritarian father, alternately embracing and assaulting them. His shtick is peculiar, to say the least, a mix of impassioned philosophizing (he defends money as the ultimate mark of civilization) and teary responses to the fleeting beauty of life, most sharply seen in a surprisingly poignant moment where he shows Lulu and Robbie a video of his son playing the cello.

Lulu has an equally poignant moment that shows *Shopping* has a heart as well as a brain. Forced to strip for Brian during the alleged audition to prove she's an actress, she recites a passage from Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* that mesmerizes.

On the other hand, Ravenhill pulls no punches here, and the play is not for the faint-hearted. Mark and Gary's relationship is one of the most troubling elements (and one that has been heavily censored in some productions around the world). Bloody sex and brutal rape are apparently inescapable in these relationships, and the production doesn't shy away from the details.

triangle's staging of this difficult material as a series of stark vignettes maximizes the emotional intensity, with two areas intermittently highlighted on a simple set.

Performances are uniformly excellent. As Lulu, Val Landrum has a staccato intensity, showing equal power in the quiet moments and the emotional eruptions. Chris Murray nails the confused Robbie from the opening scene, and he's especially strong during a long and tricky speech recounting the Ecstasy fiasco.

Gay actor Michael Teufel, familiar from many productions around town, shows serious chops in the demanding role of Mark. He beautifully captures a character who clings to rehab clichés in the face of uncontrollable emotions.

Gabe Carleton-Barnes has what may be the most difficult role—that of the twink who longs for self-destruction. He deserves praise for pulling this off, particularly when he breaks down in front

of Mark. Joe Healy also impresses as the Mephistophelean Brian, equally convincing crying one minute and grandstanding the next.

Ravenhill, who's gay and HIV-positive, has created a play in which the sexuality of the characters is shifting, not fixed, and its critique is not so much of the gay community—though there are elements of that—as of a world that commodifies and brutalizes all it touches, irrespective of orientation.

Staging *Shopping* was difficult because of the play's complexity and rawness, but it was not a difficult choice, says director Don Horn. "I have never backed down from gritty or darker theater," he says. "Here was a play that had a point, made me think and had a voice that I didn't hear many times with scripts that I read."

About the charge in some quarters that it's simply a collection of negative gay stereotypes, he asserts, "Our community must wise up and realize there are more people out there than those who go to Starbucks, Pottery Barn and live 'the good life.' All of us shop and fuck."

As for getting actors to bare their souls physically and psychologically, Horn says he "had no problem finding committed actors and tech people who were willing to tackle this play. In fact, they were excited about the material. Theater isn't only to 'enjoy,' but to experience."

Teufel certainly found the project an experience. "This is a tough play with difficult emotional content," he says, "and those challenges are always the most exciting for me."

This won't be a revelation to those who witnessed Teufel in Stark Raving Theatre's production of *After the Zipper*, in which he played a young man overcome with his own homophobia. "I very much enjoy portraying people that are as nutty and out of control as the real me—that part of me that society says is 'not OK.'"

During the process of getting to know Mark, the actor found himself able to relate to the character's motivations, "but his actions are so extreme it is pretty much playing the reverse of what and who I truly am."

Preparation for this edgy, sexually over-the-top role was also dicey, and Teufel marshaled just about every trick in the actor's bag, from sheer immersion to "sense memory," which is, he explains, figuring out how "the sights, sounds, smells and tactile stimulus that are going on in a scene" make him feel.

"Ravenhill has a wicked sense of humor," he adds. "I was not really ready for the laughs I get. 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? Or maybe it's that 'uncomfortable' laugh people do?"

This kind of immediacy and intense engagement takes its toll on the actors—you can see their exhaustion during the curtain call—but pays off for audiences hungry for strong theater. **J**

triangle productions! presents SHOPPING AND FUCKING through March 8 at Theater! Theatre!, 3430 S.E. Belmont St. Because of graphic subject matter, 21 and over only. Tickets are \$20 from 503-239-5919 or Fastixx. Don't miss Fuck Buddy Thursdays, when you can get your second ticket for \$1.

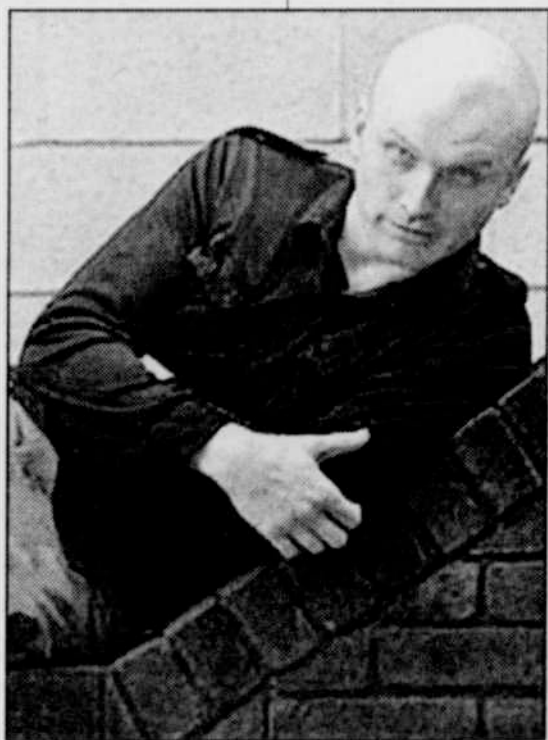


PHOTO BY GAVIN SMITH

Mark Ravenhill is so "post-gay".

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