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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

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Theater: Problematic or Promising New Plays? You Decide!

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Seeing a new piece by a young playwright always offers the tantalizing prospect of discovering a fully formed new talent busting out with a genuinely great play. More often, you hope to discover an interesting voice, a playwright good enough to make you want to see what they do next. That alone is a solid accomplishment. At the very least, you can spot a playwright with drive when they've been able to attract serious talent to their work. Even if this first show isn't a knockout, you know they have one essential skill for making it: convincing others to go on the journey with them. So here are two plays -- neither of which I found satisfying for various reasons, but both of which might very well lead to something

more substantial down the road.

LAKE WATER ** out of ****
IRT

Pouring out the angst and heartache and pain of youth is a classic move by a young playwright, though in this case I hope Troy Deutsch is not writing precisely what he knows or his high school years were nightmarish.

Lake Water begins with the audience filing in while an unhappy young man (Deutsch) is sitting on a dock staring out into the world with a lost, vacant stare while the sounds of loons and other creatures fill the air. What in God's name has happened? Has someone died? The air of sadness is pervasive. Eventually the teenager James is joined by his erstwhile best friend Iris (an excellent Samantha Soule). They

awkwardly dance around the painful facts that have driven James to leave a weeping message for Iris to come see him at one of their favorite meeting places. They reminisce over the third party of their trio, debate what boring options for "fun" to take on a dull Friday night in their midwestern town and slowly the truth emerges.

It's a catalog of high school horror stories: cluster suicides that have dogged their classmates for years and now taken their closest pal; intense bullying of both of them (the sort of bullying you'd call in the cops for), repressed sexual confusion, possibly incest and more. Will James commit suicide too? Did their friend blame them or her parents or their cruel community for her self-immolation? But most importantly of all, do we care?

This modest two-hander is given an exemplary production any playwright should be thrilled with. Director Daniel Talbott handles the dynamics of two people on a small stage smoothly, creating a fluid sense of dynamism. The weathered dock and reeds by scenery designer Eugenia Furneaux-Arends place us squarely in the world of the play. The sound design by Janie Bullard could easily have been intrusive but finds the right balance. And the show's strongest suit is Soule as Iris. She handles her character's rat-a-tat dialogue with aplomb, embodying this smart, restless, unhappy but determined young woman with ease. She gives this tale flesh and blood.

Deutsch is not quite her equal as an actor, though he does have presence and listens well (the most important task an actor in the theater must do). It's not that he's bad; it's just that she's so good. The play is earnest but confused. Crucially, we're not even sure who James might be. Though he has a girlfriend and aggressively lets everyone know they have lots of sex all the time, it's possible that James is gay. He's taunted as being gay by the omnipresent bullies. But is he gay and closeted? Confused and not out to himself? Or straight? It's okay for a character to be ambiguous; the trouble with *Lake Water* is that the playwright has confused us and not made clear who this character is to him. Since the entire show pivots on James's inner turmoil, this is a major flaw. *Lake Water* is a little incoherent, a little confused, a little confusing and a little too familiar. But it has genuine raw emotion and enough talent surrounding the playwright to show Deutsch will be given the essential opportunity to continue to write and grow.

THE MORE LOVING ONE ** out of ****
FRINGEFEST NYC/SOHO PLAYHOUSE

The last performance on the last night of FringeFest NYC 2011 was saved for the winner of the overall excellence award for best production of a play. *The More Loving One* by Cory Conley is a scabrous comedy about the hot button issue of an adult man having sex with (or rather, molesting) a 14 year old girl. Matt and Lauren (David Beck and Adriana Degirolami) live in a college town and have just returned to campus after a weekend away at some legal proceedings that have left them exhausted and tense. As they spar, we discover what happened: Matt had to testify against his friend and colleague who had committed statutory rape on a 14 year old girl. When Lauren evinces some sympathy for their friend, Matt freaks out since they are planning to use artificial insemination the following week to have a child, which he hopes will be a little girl. Matt is aghast to discover she might have elastic feelings about a Lolita-like situation.

The pot is further stirred with the appearance of their tenant and Lauren's good friend Heinrich and his younger boyfriend Henry (Jimmy Davis and Preston Martin). They've had their own momentous weekend and as Henry wonders out loud if perhaps the most transgressive act would be if the accused man actually loved the 14 year old girl (as opposed to simply lusting or wanting to dominate her), the question of who is the more loving one explodes. Is it Matt, who wants to protect his unborn child but might also be wary of his own emotions? Is it Lauren who isn't nearly as thrilled about having a kid and what it might mean for her meandering artistic ambitions? Is it the older gay man Heinrich, who feels frumpy and too old for the younger Henry but loves him desperately nonetheless? Or is it the loopy, offbeat and yet -- so we're told -- far more intelligent and balanced Henry?

If only the show didn't leave us with so many more basic questions unanswered. The cast is able, with Davis and Martin having an easier time with the better lines. Beck and Degirolami must do a lot of the heavy lifting and that's made harder by Conley's confused text. The way Henry is written, it seemed at first he was a high school senior, rather than a college senior. Even more strangely, it's clear that Heinrich and Lauren especially are good friends. He takes part in her art projects and has been renting a room from the couple for at least a year. And yet, he's been dating Henry for FOUR YEARS and has never introduced them to his boyfriend. Would you date someone for four years who has never had you over to his room a single time -- or perhaps only when his landlords and friends (gay friendly ones, needless to say) are out of town? Heinrich's behavior not only isn't explained, it's never even a point of discussion, which makes it all the more bizarre and strange.

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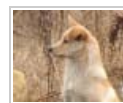
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Moment to moment the show is lucid and fine, with some amusing lines by a cast that's solidly directed by Craig Baldwin. But one has the feeling this is a show randomly written about a hot button issue simply to tantalize. The characters don't track, the numerous issues raised aren't really explored and unintentional misdirections abound. If there's an attempt to paint the "new" couple as more grounded and authentic than the married couple cracking under the pressure of revelations, it's entirely unearned given the oddness of their own situation. Certainly we never get anything more than the most superficial look at the scandalous situation that set it off. Perhaps if Conley writes more from the heart next time rather than merely juggling ideas, he'll make fuller use of the talent he's able to attract.

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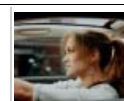
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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to these show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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