

One-Act Flashes

Student One-Acts
Wisner Theater, CSUC

Few evenings of local theater offer as much diversity and diversion as Chico State's annual student-directed one-acts, performed this week in two parts with three plays each.

The Monday and Wednesday evening shows opened with the oft-performed *Laundry and Bourbon*, presenting a sweltering back-porch afternoon in Maynard, Texas, with housewives Elizabeth (Nichole Forbes) and Hattie (Jamie Gandola) reminiscing and talking about Elizabeth's absent, philandering husband and his pink 1959 Thunderbird.

Of the three productions of the James McLure comedy I've seen, this was the first one to exhibit any overall vision—the play actually *went somewhere*. Director Molly

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Johnson kept pacing unpredictable and always entertaining.

It helped that Forbes made the coolheaded Elizabeth entirely convincing, and Gandola—who has quietly become one of Chico's top talents—was magnificent as the acerbic, abrasive Hattie, with terrific comic timing best exhibited on a hilarious telephone monologue.

Jonathan Marc Sherman's *Women and Wallace* starred Tom LaMere as a young man whose mother commits suicide when he is 6 years old.

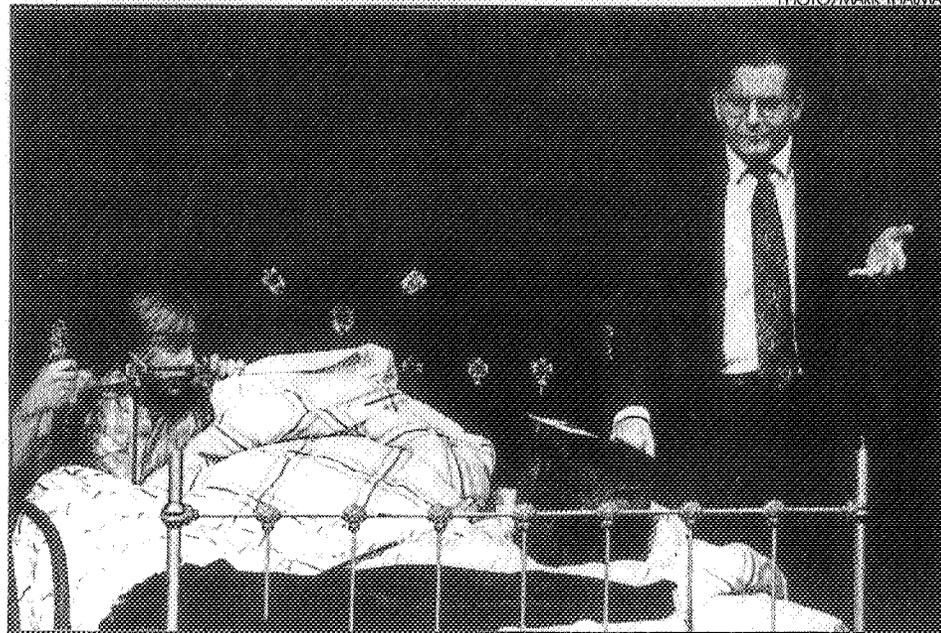
In a relentless series of brief, Christopher Durang-ish blackout scenes, Wallace grows to college age. He is shown through relationships with the women in his life—from his grandmother to his psychiatrist to his first girlfriend—played by eight different actors.

As the cynical, unsmiling Wallace, LaMere was subtle and exceptional, and the women were uniformly competent, though only Rachelle Niedzwiecki, playing Wallace's girlfriend, stood out.

Julie Hansen's intuitive direction was hurt by frequent shuffling of actors and props. In the original 1988 New York production, the women sat slightly offstage, in view the entire show; that might have worked. Moving the over-elaborate furniture also slowed down the production.

Only a third of Monday's audience stayed for *Acrobatics*, which began after 10:30 p.m. The majority may have made the right decision—I was entirely bewildered by the ambiguous and inarticulate production.

I can't fault enthusiastic actors Shawna McCartney and K.D. Gulko, both of whom sparkled. The high-energy McCartney elicited an ovation with a delightfully frenzied reading



PHOTO/MARK THAIMAN

POWER PLAY In Sam Shepard's stunning *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, Tony Bridgers, left, plays a man who dreams winners in horse races and becomes the object of power struggles. Brian Conigliaro also stars in the closing show of Chico State's student-directed one-acts.

of a love letter, and both gave the obscure dialogue their all.

The aimless, frustrating script—which shows two women in a Hilton Hotel room over several days talking about love, travel and insecurity—ultimately failed the actors and talented director Charmaine Colvin.

Durang's laugh riot *The Actor's Nightmare* kicked off the Tuesday-Thursday series with a *tour-de-force* performance from the amazing Steve Wiecking, who portrayed George Spelvin, a man stuck in a play he hasn't rehearsed.

As a disoriented Spelvin tries to fill space and follow scripts he's never heard of, the staging behind him changes from Coward to Shakespeare to Beckett to Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*.

With a nervous grin and tentative demeanor, Wiecking played the role for all it was worth, even taking a play program from an audience member. While generally not up to Wiecking's level—with the exception of the stentorian Randy Wray—the supporting cast was competent, and Carrie Stroud's direction kept the production lively and stimulating.

Without sounding overly cruel, I'm not sure what I can say about *Reasonable Circulation*, the second show of the evening. The production failed in nearly every way—stilted script, mediocre acting—even by performers I've previously admired—and haphazard direction by Dietrich Toellner.

The show was unbelievably low in energy and slow Tuesday night; I can only hope Thursday's production improves.

Sam Shepard's *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* proved a stunning closer, easily the most polished of the one-acts. Centering on a man who dreams winners in horse races (Tony Bridgers) and power struggles, the physical, surreal show was held together by phenomenal performances and Michael Gannon's firm direction.

Except for Brian Conigliaro's wild, over-the-top performance, acting by principals Bridgers, Jim Hiser, Johnny Lancaster and Jonathan Ford was nothing short of great, all the way through the play's bizarre, violent conclusion.

Gannon should be commended for attempting material as challenging as *Geography*, a difficult though beautifully written work.

Last year's one-acts were student-written as well as -directed, and the results were uneven; while two or three of the short plays worked well, a couple were flat-out awful—not that different from this year's.

There's no reason why the best two or three efforts of a playwriting class couldn't be performed along with established plays. Maybe next year CSUC's Department of Theatre and Dance can try a mix, providing space for aspiring writers and directors.

—MATTHEW BUDMAN