



Theater & Performance

Listings for Friday, July 15, through Thursday, July 21, 2005

SLOWANNA The setting might be contemporary America, but the school known as "System 16" is a nightmare straight out of Victorian literature. Part lunatic asylum and part prison, it's populated by misfit students and derelict teachers. In this new play, Jeremy Menekseoglu depicts life within these walls in his characteristic Dickensian fashion. (Even more horrifying than his grisly imagery is his assertion in a program note that System 16 has a real-life counterpart.) But despite any temptations to overact, the Dream Theatre Company ensemble--led by Jennifer Shin and Colby Sellers as the crusaders attempting to do good--deliver clean, straightforward, unaffected performances. --**Mary Shen Barnidge** Side Studio, 1520 W. Jarvis, 773-474-9070. Through 7/30: Fri-Sat 8 PM, Sun 7 PM. \$10-\$15.



ON THE FRINGE: NEW REVIEWS OF CHICAGO'S DIVERSE THEATER SCENE

Humor tempers tough stories

'SlowAnna,' 'Clay' try to find laughs

By Nina Metz
Special to the Tribune

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The plight of messed-up kids dominates two new plays receiving thoughtful, if imperfect, debuts on the storefront theater scene. Both traffic in the loaded territory where children are raped and young women mutilate themselves; where homosexuals fend off epithets; and the fleshy skin of someone's chest becomes a carving board where insults are permanently spelled out in crude scar tattoos. Heavy stuff. But the oppressive narratives in each are leavened by brackish comedy as well. Life is tough for everyone, but at least there are a few sour laughs along the way.

With its Orwellian overtones and pulpy storyline, "SlowAnna" is the stronger of the two. Actors portraying children greet you at the door wearing cheerful, hand-lettered signs around their necks that read "ticket helper" and "seat helper." The pre-show music--cheeky, groovy sounds that put one in the mind of "The Monkees"--is occasionally interrupted by hilarious school announcements over the loudspeaker reminding us that "uproarious laughter will not be tolerated" and that today's lunch menu is macaroni and cheese and chocolate milk.

The tone shifts dramatically, however, once the show starts. The story unfolds in a vaguely futuristic school that has become the facility of last resort for troublesome students and shady teachers. It is here that horrible things happen to children, including Johanna (puppy-eyed Anna Weiler), whose low IQ has earned her the nickname, SlowAnna.

When a young teacher named Moon (Jennifer Shin, a composed, empathetic actress) arrives, the status quo is challenged. I won't reveal how it ends, but the story's conclusion is a bit too pat. The plot twists and performances, on the other hand, are wildly entertaining. In this Dream Theatre production, the show's playwright and director, Jeremy Menekseoglu, takes every advantage of the tiny Side Project space in Rogers Park to amp up the tension.

Menekseoglu also plays the vile school janitor, a puffy, greasy-haired loser right out of Tennessee Williams. Though his accent veers between Southern drawl and blue collar Boston, and the performance itself is scaled too large for the compact space, it works anyway. Rarely is stage villainy both this funny and disturbing at once.

Through July 30 at the Side Project, 1520 W. Jarvis St.; \$10-\$15; 773-474-9070.