

Take Five

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Balloon man, though not goat-footed: Carr and Shaud in The News

PHOTO: CAROL ROSEGG

The producers of this year's Ensemble Studio Theatre play marathon have arranged the first half of it, Series A, as a long anticlimax. For an antidote, theatergoers may wish to read about the pieces in reverse order of presentation/quality:

5. ***Things We Said Today***, by hateful Neil LaBute.

Tired idea #547: Draw parallel between “us” and characters from Greek drama, using extreme violence as “proof.” Dana Delany fights to lend credible emotional arc to scene in which wife’s discovery of husband’s years of infidelity with sister leads her to abort own fetus w/ handy steak knife in crowded restaurant. Would that LaBute’s mom had done same. Fact that people won’t ignore LaBute better evidence that humanity sucks than his stupid plays.

4. ***The Probabilities***, by Wendy MacLeod.

Weatherman, in monologue botched by smarmy Bruce MacVittie, overstates case that “weather matters.” Why? Play implies that “hypothetical” story told about drunk party boy who wanders off, passes out, and freezes to death under snowdrift may be story of said meteorologist’s son. (Clue: Weatherman weeps while telling story.) Thesis improperly supported: Irresponsible drinking killed kid! Not failure to heed weather report!

3. ***The First Tree in Antarctica***, by Julia Cho.

Adrienne dreams of Antarctica, wonders why. Scientist sister says Adrienne is lonely. Adrienne had child at 16, abandoned him. Years later, kid calls—awkward!—but w/o reconciliation. Though dreams shift to forests, loneliness persists. Affably performed by Jessica Jade Andres, but play seems incomplete, maybe due to short form. Tree represents end of world, perhaps due to climate change.

2. ***My Dog Heart***, by Edith Freni. Semi-experimental piece, snappily directed by John Gould Rubin. Freni compares love, in overworked metaphor, to disease—you thought VD meant Valentine’s Day. As cure for relationship withdrawal after jilted by rakish beau, girl must choose between transplants: “dog heart” (feelings), “tin heart” (no feelings), or “death” (?). Play has patina of adolescent philosophy; girl’s “choice” not real. Joy underestimated as balance for love trouble—play waxes romantic with capital R. Title gives away girl’s decision.

1. ***The News***, by Billy Aronson. Geneva Carr charmingly plays stoic Karen, hospitalized for cancer-like disease, now likely terminal. Operation canceled, Karen must explain impending death to friends with overactive cell phones and to crazed husband George, who arrives with mysteriously wet balloons. George, played by excellent Grant Shaud, has hilarious freak-out re balloons, followed by hysterical laughing fit, tenderness, singing into phones. Inventive, funny, touching, well-played.