

Tryst and Shout

by FRANCINE RUSSO

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Think of an evening of one-acts as a tasting menu at a trendy eatery. At Ensemble Studio Theatre's "Marathon 2001, Series A" (running through May 20), you can enjoy mainly desserts—especially if your appetite for chocolate runs to dark and bitter.

The most satisfying of the four tidbits, Billy Aronson's *Night Rules*, takes its on-target premise to the horizon of absurdity; paradoxically, it arrives there with both inevitability and surprise. In Andrea and Ken's living room, Rob and Becky chat with their hosts while the children of both couples play together offstage. Andrea and Ken, righteous parents, hammer at Becky with near religious fervor about the dangers of letting their daughter sleep in their bed, while Rob timidly says amen to their preaching. As Ken continues the

debate with Becky, their mates begin furiously humping each other a few feet away. In a breathless rush of events, there are lame excuses, ultimatums, breakups, and bickering over the minute details of custody arrangements. The denouement is a wicked reversal of positions on the iron rules about who sleeps in whose bed, and the logic is priceless.

Aronson has nailed these parental holy wars and couples' skirmishes with a keenly observant eye. As directed by Jamie Richards with crackling timing, the foursome turn in hilarious performances, especially Joe Urla as the rigid Ken, trembling with fanaticism, and Katherine Leask as the beaten-down-but-not-out Becky.

Cherie Vogelstein's *Brown*—also directed by Richards with breakneck pace and satiric edge—turns out to be pretty black. In a nightmare job interview for a classy investment bank, young Peter (Zach Shaffer) is forced by the glossy senior partner (Sam Freed), vicious underling Maurie (Grant Shaud), and coquettish exec Mary (Susan Greenhill) to make a hypothetical—and unthinkable—decision. The cast shines, Shaffer especially as the uptight job seeker sweating through his Kafkaesque trial. Laughs abound, though this extended joke ends with an anticipated punch line. And unlike *Night Rules*, the play operates on a contrived rather than organic premise.

So brief it's a mere tickle of a play, David Ives's

Arabian Nights, directed by Jason McConnell Buzas, displays the playwright's trademark mischief with language. Here, a yenta (Anne O'Sullivan)—dolloed up in enough gauze and spangles for a harem of chorus girls—acts as an “interpreter” between a young American businessman (Christopher Duva) and a shop girl (Melinda Page Hamilton) at an Arabian bazaar. The joke is that both are speaking English, and the translator spouts schmaltzy versions of what they are feeling but not saying. The piece is a trifle, but it coaxes smiles.

The only serious item on this menu is Tom Coash's *Ukimwi*, which also dramatizes an encounter between a young American businessman (in Cairo) and a local—in this case, a Kenyan hooker. As she aggressively but unsuccessfully hustles him—flirting, guilt tripping, spitting abuse—the air snaps with sexual and political tensions. Men are pigs, Americans are bearers of AIDS. Eliza Beckwith directs tautly, and Nicole Leach rivets as the spicy, spiky, and scary whore. The encounter has power, even with a little preachiness leaking into the drama. Although the “shocker” ending doesn't really shock, still, it gets to you.