THEater REVIEW

In a Flight of Imagination, Escaping the Meltdown

By JASON ZINOMAN

Imagine, if you will, that the worst nightmares of the environmental movement came true. Lakes dried up. December turned hot and muggy. Drinking water became toxic. What then?

In a paranoid science fiction film, the hero would try to save the day. But in Rinne Groff’s meditative political fable, “What Then,” she just goes to sleep. In the first scene of the play, produced by Clubbed Thumb, a well-regarded company that develops new American plays, Diane (Meg MacCary), a smiling suburban woman in pajamas, tells her husband that

With the environment in decay, one woman creates her own oasis.

she has quit her job as an accountant to become a stay-at-home dreamer. She spends 14 hours a day (and sometimes more) imagining a different, better world in which she works as an architect and builds a fantastical housing complex complete with gardens, a movie theater and a velvet conveyor belt in the lobby.

Her husband, Tom (Andrew Dolan), who works at the kind of mysterious multinational corporation that you know is up to no good, is skeptical, to say the least. Why does she sleep so much? And how can she be building something that obviously

“What Then” continues through Jan. 31 at the Ohio Theater, 66 Wooster Street, SoHo, (212) 869-4444.

What Then
Ohio Theater

doesn’t exist? She volleys back: “It doesn’t exist just because you can’t experience it.”

From this Philosophy 101 exchange, the play takes off into more hallucinatory directions, often with joyful, teasing success. Ms. Groff, one of downtown’s more prolific and skillful playwrights, even has her characters break into an indie rock song in the last act, a nice surprise that puts one in mind of the work of Richard Maxwell. She seems to have a facility for turning political ideas into theatrical metaphors (think of Diane as Mother Earth and Tom as the Americans who neglect her), and if her prose sometimes becomes overly literal and labored, there’s never any doubt that there’s an active, lively intelligence at work.

Of great help is the graceful direction by Hal Brooks, who proves that his sensitive staging in “Thorn, Pain” was no fluke. Jo Winiarski’s sleek set — all geometric shapes and silver appliances — invokes a world divorced from nature, and Kirk Bookman’s shadowy lighting brings noir to the suburbs. Also worth much praise is Merritt Wever, who plays Tom’s daughter, Sallie, with a slumping, angry edge. Rounding out the cast is her boyfriend, Bahktiyar (Piter Marek), a vaguely Arabic character who also figures as something of a double for Tom.

Ms. Groff’s “Ruby Sunrise,” which opened at the Public Theater in November, told a story about how corporate greed destroyed the early dreams of television. In this looser, less conventional work, she shows how dreams can (at least temporarily) defeat corporate greed.

Meg MacCary and Piter Marek in Rinne Groff’s “What Then.”
New York

What Then

Reviewed by: Dan Bacaizo

Diane has a dream job — literally. When she goes to sleep, the former accountant embarks upon her new career as an architect. She's currently working on a low-income housing complex with a tomato garden that can remove the toxicity in the soil. The line between fantasy and reality blurs in Rinne Groff's imaginative new play What Then, an off-kilter family drama set in a semi-apocalyptic near future.

When Diane (Meg MacCary) announces her new line of employment to her husband Tom (Andrew Dolan), he naturally thinks she's either gone crazy or is trying to "guilt trip" him. "I have a clear conscience," she says, explaining the reason that she is able to sleep for such prolonged lengths of time. Of course, Tom hears this as Diane telling him that he cannot say the same of himself. The things he does in his own job, it seems, are causing — or at least contributing to — the decay of the environment.

Added into the mix is the plight of Tom's daughter from a previous marriage, Sallie (Merrit Wever); he kicked her out because of her drug use, and she is currently attempting to find alternative housing. Then there's Bakhtiyor (Piter Marek), a mysterious individual who might be Tom's drug dealer, Sallie's boyfriend, Diane's landscape architect, or perhaps all three.

The situation that Groff presents has a sci-fi feel, yet character relationships are all too recognizable. The emotional distance between Diane and Tom is keenly felt, even when she's not falling asleep on the kitchen counter during one of their arguments. Likewise, the conflict between father and daughter is filled with resentment, anger, and even a little bit of love.

The production is unevenly directed by Hal Brooks, but it still brings out the humor and vitality of the play. MacCary captures the neurotically brittle personality of Diane, though both she and Dolan push a bit too hard in their opening scene. Dolan's displays of emotion do not seem grounded, which makes it difficult to understand what's really going on with his character.

Wever has a quirky presence that at times seems hypematuralistic and, at other times, bizarrely stylized; she'd be perfect in a Richard Maxwell production, as that's exactly the kind of quality he's best known for. Marek has a laid-back presence that can be sexy, enigmatic, or threatening, depending upon the situation; his interactions with MacCary's Diane are the production's strongest, mainly due to the two actors' simmering chemistry.

Set designer Jo Winiarski has provided a naturalistic kitchen for the characters to move around in, filled with shiny surfaces. Kirk Bookman's lighting helps move the production into the surreal, particularly by causing the kitchen counter to glow during key moments.

What Then includes two songs with music by Joe Popp. The bouncy title number, sung by Marek and MacCary, is both cheesy and charming. The other song, featuring the entire cast, has a catchy tune that's a cross between bubblegum pop and punk. These musical interludes are quite amusing and fit the sort of avant-garde aesthetic that continues to be popular with a number of downtown playwrights and production companies.
What Then
January 19, 2006
By Karl Levett

Playwright Rinne Groff has seen the future in What Then and oh, my, it doesn't look good. Outside the house, the lake is becoming a dustbowl; inside, a family is also evaporating. In their clinical kitchen, husband Tom (Andrew Dolan) is a powerbroker of murky multinational projects, while his wife, Diane (Meg MacCary), once an accountant, now spends her days sleeping her life away. In her over-recurring dream, Diane has found a better world -- and a better job as an architect, building a utopian housing complex. Tom's teenage daughter, Sallie (Merritt Wever), with her angry ruthlessness, is much more earthbound, while her ethnic boyfriend, Bahktiyor (Peter Marad), is certainly a drug dealer, but is he also the landscape gardener in Diane's dream scheme? This is just the beginning of the imaginative but disquieting games Groff wants to play. Diane exclaims, "There is another place and I'm building it!" This might stand as the playwright's mantra as she ambitiously sets about revealing her nightmare vision.

In this surreal landscape, some will see Groff as zigzagging between the provocative and the pretentious. So much is thrown into the mixer: the environment, corporate greed, xenophobia, drug use, identity, the nature of truth, and the importance of dreams. While some will depart in a Groff fog, there's enough here for each audience member to leave with a singular interpretation of what's really going on. Groff has a favorite trick of creating a mystery and then pulling the rug out from under it with a rational explanation; this solution, however, often cleverly rolls into yet another mystery. And the playwright is not above self-mockery, as when Sallie shouts, "Just because she's flaky doesn't mean she's deep!"

Hal Brooks expertly directs his talented cast of four in a superior example of ensemble work. Jo Winarski's brave-new-world set is greatly enhanced by Kirk Bookman's remarkable lighting. Bookman's design perfectly mirrors the playwright's intention to "explore the options."
The Phantom of the Opera may be nearing the ripe old age of 18, but most shows in this city don’t even play 18 shows. That doesn’t mean that they’re unworthy, of course – far from it, at least in our book. For instance, there’s Clubbed Thumb’s new production What Then, which (including previews last weekend) has 16 showings at the Ohio Theatre. Written by Rinne Groff and directed by Hal Brooks, who recently got accolades for his work on Thom Paine, this is the story of a dysfunctional family and their attempts to stitch their relationships and psyches back not through therapy but rather through creating and exploring new realities through dreams and drugs. It’s a powerful vision that will leave you questioning your own perception of existence.

Another surreal drama with 16 performances is Vicki Caroline Cheatwood’s new play Fits & Starts: The Sacred Heart, beginning previews tonight at the Access Theater. In the wake of a huge storm, everything in the life of a once ordinary family changes big time: there’s a new star in the sky and the mother expects impending Rapture. From the sound of it, you may not come out of the theater a whole lot more enlightened about what happens than you are now, and we say that not to criticize in advance – cryptic can be good, and this show sounds intriguing.

Somewhat away from the altered-reality vein, and with many fewer performances, is Josh Lefkowitz’s solo show Help Wanted, which is this weekend and next at Dixon Place. The subtitle (“A Personal Search for Meaningful Employment at the Start of the 21st Century”) gives a pretty good idea of what to expect: Lefkowitz performs an autobiographical monologue about life and panic after the BFA, including how Spalding Gray’s work and example, and unfortunate recent death, impacted Lefkowitz’s life. The show aims to bring home the reality of this rough transition in a way that’s likely to strike a chord with quite a few people in this city of strivers.

Then there’s another play about one man, but with more than one man in the cast. Anton, by Pierre Van Der Spuy, is the story of the final years in the life of Chekhov, who gave us so many wonderful stories. (In case you’re wondering, this one has 15 performances altogether). Van Der Spuy is a doctor, and he has drawn on his medical background to understand Chekhov – who was also a doctor – and compose this rich portrait of a complicated, fascinating man.

The House of Desires tops all those – 19 performances, more than one for every year of Phantom’s run! This is a translation by Catherine Boyle of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz’s baroque romantic comedy with mistaken identities and overeager lovers to spare. The Storm Theater shares its building with a church, which strikes us as appropriate since Sor Juana was a nun, but this production doesn’t look like it will be deferent to religion in any way – like Sor Juana, the play is multifaceted, and there’s plenty of bawdiness to go around.

As we said, just because these shows are playing a tiny fraction of the number of times Phantom and other Broadway behemoths have doesn’t mean that they’re a fraction worth seeing, but it does mean that you have a lot fewer chances to go, so catch them while you can!
Forecast: Unseasonably warm days, incredibly productive nights

Though global warming may result in unhappy events such as increased wildfires, more aggressive rainstorms, a rise in mosquito-borne diseases, and the eventual submersion of New York, it also makes for some astonishingly pleasant winter mornings. At the beginning of Rinne Groff’s What Then, Diane welcomes her husband, Tom, back from his jog. “You’re sweaty,” she muses. “Remember when December used to be cold?” In Groff’s not-so-distant future, both the environment and the emotional lives of her characters have become dangerously overheated.

Diane (Meg MacCary) has news for Tom (Andrew Dolan). Her face shining, she announces that she’s quit her job in accounting and become an architect—but only while she dreams. This explains her 14-hour sleep schedule; she’s been putting in overtime. The project: “a new housing complex with accessible retail space, and an open-air garden for concerts or fireworks displays,” Diane gushes. As Diane sleeps in the middle of her suburban kitchen, Groff establishes a graceful exchange between the unlikely and the everyday. Clearly marked boundaries between sleeping and waking lives grow fluid and sinuous, as do the moral choices among the characters—including Sallie (Merritt Wever), Tom’s grown daughter, and Bahktiyor (Piter Marek), her peculiar boyfriend.

Though it falters in its final moments, the play and its actors offer a distinct, and often moving, alternate world. MacCary positively glows as Diane details her structure, and Marek is striking as a villain turned ministering angel. Groff and director Hal Brooks vary the tone and pace, following the frenetic with the meditative or the somber with a full-cast musical number crooned into a child’s microphone with the refrain, “I’m sorry for myself.” It’s a great tune, but for all involved in this production, apologies are quite unnecessary.
I Have Loved Strangers

Pictured: Jay Smith and T. Ryder Smith in a publicity photo for I Have Loved Strangers (photo © Carl Skutsch)

nytheatre.com review
Tomi Tsunoda • June 5, 2006

Anne Washburn's I Have Loved Strangers, first of this year's new plays at Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks festival, introduces us to a fragmented portrait of New York City. It moves among several disparate stories and characters: a Biblical King and a prophet who bears him bad news; a modern urban guru and his wife Ruthie, whose marriage struggles in the gap between fear and optimism; and the wife's friend Emily, who leads a group of domestic terrorists operating underground. The play eventually weaves these separate poetic strains into a tale of a self-destructive motley crew of urbanites who are unsure of what they want from themselves, each other, and the world around them.

The production begins as a primordial sea of phrases, characters, and choreographic patterns. Exploiting the expanse of the Ohio Theatre, director Johanna McKeon places most of this story on a bare, transformative stage, which takes more shape as the story itself comes further into focus.

The cast moves through the bare stage trying to activate seemingly unrelated snippets of text through seemingly unrelated characters and moments. Although this was true to the nature of the writing, I found myself drifting during this section. Aside from a general picture of an urban world with shifting points of focus, I found little to hold onto through the first third or so of the play.

Once the play settles into itself, and the actors are allowed to connect and develop relationships, the production begins to take off. The story seems to unfold in both a Biblical and a modern era simultaneously, causing me to take even more time to catch up to what these people and their stories had to do with each other. I was unsure of how our Biblical prophet transcended time to arrive in the NYC apartment with the terrorists. By the time the play came to its dramatic climax, I wanted to care more about the paradox of ideals these people find themselves confronting than I'd been allowed by the structure of the text.

This was a particular shame because the cast seem so willing to commit to whatever the play throws them. Standing out are the two prophets: T. Ryder Smith as Jeremiah reminded me of how beautiful an actor's instrument can be when stretched to its physical limits. His body continually flowed over the line between beautiful and grotesque movement, and sold me on his ability to channel the word of God. James Stanley as Hananiah, the play's gentler prophet, succeeds in keeping his more poetic language grounded in a personal truth. His gentleness and humility provide a perfect counterpoint to the possessions of Smith. Also noteworthy in this production is Jay Smith, the Non-Prophet/King who activates McKeon's brave silences with magnetism and depth, deftly crossing over the boundaries between good and evil, trust and betrayal, fear and power. However, Laura Flanagan's construction of Emily, the patriot terrorist, seemed a forced caricature of someone who cares deeply about politics and activism, rather than a truthful engagement in Emily's deep drive and conflicted identity.

Set designer Michael Carnahan and lighting designer Driscoll Otto smartly take advantage of the six tall, imposing columns in the theater's natural architecture, lending the world of this play a sense of sacredness and grandeur. The emotion of the lights underscores the poetry of the text and magnitude of its ideas. The upstage wall consists of a large scrim flat and a gorgeous door that looks crafted from rods of iron, set inside a vaulted brick doorway. But although it is used as an entrance/exit, sometimes creating striking images, it never takes on the dramatic significance its design seemed to suggest.

Overall, I was thrilled by the production's magical moments. The entire team seemed undaunted by
huge, theatrical ideas, which was exhilarating and a rare treat. Director McKeon takes gorgeous and gutsy risks with silence and darkness, and navigates the shifting text with integrity and passionate imagery. Washburn's text tackles huge ideas through some truly personal conflicts and engaging characters, but much of the poetry felt self-conscious to me, maybe better read than dramatized. I deeply invested in the story once I was allowed to access it, and found myself wishing Washburn would take one more step back and allow the characters to fully take over the play.
Prophet Taking
by Les Hunter
I Have Loved Strangers reviewed June 7, 2006

Sunday school was never terribly interesting. But unbeknownst to my 12-year-old self, the Bible is filled with the kinds of juicy stories about sex, death, and destruction that should make any adolescent salivate.

I Have Loved Strangers, a new work by the excellent Clubbed Thumb company and part of its "Summerworks 2006" series at the Ohio Theater, draws on Bible stories about prophets, placing them in present-day New York City. The problem here is that there are far too many plots, characters, and anachronisms. Although there are a few shining moments as well as some good acting, what mainly results is a confusing work that attempts to do too much.

The play takes place in a New York that is like a modern-day Babylon. With elements of the stories of both Jeremiah and Ezekiel, it tries to weave together three different plotlines about prophets and prophecies. What emerges, however, is not a melding of the old and the new but a stiff hodgepodge of conflicting narratives. The three stories are disjointed and seemingly unrelated, and are tied together only toward the end. Scenes from different plotlines are juxtaposed for maximum confusion. Not until late in the production does one finally begin to understand who each character is.

The first story has to do with a prophet in rags, Jeremiah (T. Ryder Smith), who by dress and speech seems to belong more to the Bible than the Big Apple. Not unlike the biblical Ezekiel, he breaks a bottle to symbolize the imminent destruction of the land, although it is not clear if this destruction is destined for New York or Jerusalem.

Jeremiah is first seen wandering aimlessly among contemporary Manhattanites, who are choreographed moving in sync in a manner closer to dance than drama. As the urbanites discuss funny and entertaining "slice-of-life" tidbits that would appeal mainly to an audience of New Yorkers ("Smith Street used to be a dump, but now it's really nice"), Jeremiah appears to be a lunatic prophet of doomsday, not unlike the contemporary kind. He could easily be wearing a placard that says, "Repent! The end draws near."
His story is in stark contrast to that of the far more mellow Hananiah, a new age prophet (and, in the Bible, a false one). He appears in domestic scenes with his wife, who is greatly swayed by his charisma. With his good looks, quick smile, and impervious self-assuredness, one could easily imagine him as a charming cult leader. The scenes between Hananiah (James Stanley) and his wife, Ruthie (Jennifer Ruby Morris), are funny at first, placing the seemingly otherworldly character of a prophet in a quotidian setting for a domestic satire, replete with such marital problems as miscommunication, petty fights, and bruised egos. The first scenes are quite amusing and fresh, but the narrative becomes more serious and tedious as the unhappy couple's relationship steadily worsens.

The third story line has to do with a ragtag group of revolutionaries who seem like the Weather Underground radicals of the 60's and 70's. Though it is not clear what they are fighting for and whom they are fighting against, their struggle slowly becomes part of the other two stories, leading to an explosive ending. There is also a fourth, half-told, and seemingly unrelated story line that involves two unnamed persons wandering through a forest, visiting a cemetery, and watching fireflies. Throughout most of these scenes, the theater is dark, and the actors are seen by the flashlights they carry.

As Jeremiah, Smith astutely assumes the role of someone who has become a medium of God. He writhes on the floor, bends his back and trembles, and appears to be in great pain and fear, not knowing what he will say next and how much trouble it will get him into. Stanley, as the hunky Hananiah, has a winning smile and easy affability that makes it easy to understand why his wife, played in a suitably understated fashion by the vivacious Jennifer Ruby Morris, has fallen for his charms. Despite his seemingly sweet veneer, he also shows signs that he is a sinister, manipulative figure desperately trying to control his wife.

The set is quite minimal: a terracotta-colored screen as a backdrop and a castle-like gate to add to the biblical feel.

_I Have Loved Strangers_ is a challenging piece that, in moments, uses ironic humor to show a biblical figure in modern-day life. It also raises interesting questions about the nature of prophets and why people follow them. Overall, though, this overambitious production has an ambiguous quality that never quite lets the audience know exactly what is going on. Ultimately, we would profit from a bit more clarity.
Alice the Magnet

Pictured: Sheri Graubert and Maria Dizzia in a publicity photo for Alice the Magnet (photo © Carl Skutsch)

nytheatre.com review
Terri Galvin · June 11, 2006

Have you ever squirmed uncomfortably under the relentless gaze of an actor breaking the fourth wall? With all due respect to Brecht, don't you secretly, fervently, wish that he or she would just save all the prodding and goading for the other characters onstage—and let you quietly skulk back into your blissfully anonymous darkness?

Me? I'm a "flight" over "fight" kinda gal every time.

Fortunately, Clubbed Thumb's production of Erin Courtney's Alice the Magnet won't let us off the hook that easily. Even after the eponymous Alice, presenting her renowned self-help seminar, releases us from a visualization exercise (and the house lights mercifully dim!) we can still expect to be confronted and challenged by this provocative play.

In a nuanced performance by Sheri Graubert, Alice is the epitome of anodyne eloquence, her soothing cadence and measured, self-assured gestures nearly a parody of all those "viewers' choice" gurus that flood PBS during pledge week. Cannily costumed by Kirche Leigh Zele, Alice's presentation is one of thoroughly "evolved" clarity, and when she inquires serenely if we "feel fear," we're eager to believe that the faint whiff of snake oil might instead be some fragrant variety of green tea.

And what could provide a more dire juxtaposition to this polished perfection than poor, befuddled schoolteacher Louise? Disheveled in appearance and wildly scattered in demeanor, Louise deals with her personal demons by anesthetizing them. Fueled by caffeine and alcohol, her palpable anxiety renders her ideal prey for a classroom full of circling adolescent jackals. When, in the third scene, newly unemployed Louise and her most unruly student, Arthur, each wind up working for Alice's multi-million-dollar operation, we're riveted by the promise of imminent transformation.

And transformation we get. Unspooling an intricate choreography of contrasting personas, Courtney doesn't settle for mere issues, but plunges unflinchingly into the riskier realm of ideas. Essentially she offers us an examination of opposites, but the inherent tension of thesis-versus-antithesis never evaporates into dry debate. Hope versus fear, compassion versus power, altruism versus greed are all explored—while external, often arbitrary, forces shape these characters in ways that no hard-won "clarity" will ever completely combat.

After a terrifying skirmish with fans forces Alice to regroup, Louise and Arthur—along with Alice's beleaguered assistant John (the spot-on Quentin Mare)—must struggle on without their mentor's addictive guidance. That Louise undergoes an absolute metamorphosis is narratively inevitable; that Courtney refuses to reduce her to an Alice-clone is dramatically exhilarating. In a subtle and detailed portrayal by Maria Dizzia, Louise learns how to confront fear, all right, but her versions of "clarity" and "solutions" grow far more ruthlessly "evolved" than anything the compassionate Alice ever articulated.

Directed with precision by Pam MacKinnon, the cast mines every last recess of messy ambiguity, exploiting the premise that nothing, save perhaps a direction on a magnetic compass, has a true polar opposite. Are fear and hope diametrically opposed, or merely two sides of one coin? Are flight and fight the only options, or can fear also induce paralysis? Are greed and philanthropy mutually exclusive, or, in fact, covertly symbiotic? The elusive "synthesis" might prove less a "solution," and more a deeply conflicted—and profoundly human—compromise after all.

Which brings us back to troubled, idealistic Arthur (Cohlie Brocato), whose moral expansion provides one
of the evening's more theatrical moments. Arthur's journey is the only one we're permitted to observe years later, and it's he who delivers the play's final line: an invitation to identify our "greatest fear" and our "greatest hope."

Which, if you've been paying any attention while passively sitting in the dark, inspires an entirely different sort of squirming—one from which there's no easy flight after the curtain descends.
Quail

nytheatre.com review
Ivanna Cullinan · June 19, 2006

Plays in development are both the curse and the glory of contemporary theater. The thriving industry-within-the-industry created around the development process sometimes does mean that works not ready for an audience are produced. However, on occasion there can be a production where even though the play is not quite finished, it is still a fully worthwhile, rich evening for the audience. Quail by Rachel Hoeffel, the last of Clubbed Thumb's current festival offerings at the Ohio Theater, is that kind of experience. This production is so strong (especially the acting), that it deserves to be seen.

Quail follows Arlene, a legal secretary, as she floats through her life at a small law firm in New York's financial district. The firm is occupied by two classic New York lawyers who possess varying degrees of curmudgeony. They are performed by the wonderful Gerry Bamman as Dean, specific in so many moments that he contributes a fullness that may not be inherent in the piece, and the intent Everett Quinton as Alan, whose precise reactions to characters onstage and off populates the play with its unseen characters.

Amidst them is Arlene. She gets coffee, tapes her thoughts onto a mini-recorder, has sex in the closet, but—most important to her—she does not do her filing. By Arlene's own admission (in one of the somewhat disjointed 9/11 references), she would rather die making a sandwich than at the copier machine.

This office routine is broken up by some strangely brilliant, macabre moments of ill health experienced by her boss Dean and occasional visits from the son of Dean's ex-partner who is going through a divorce or the East Village night club owner who is a friend of the Alan's dead lover. All of this weirdly interesting activity seems to swirl around an oddly distant Arlene.

Quail contains an abundance of small, profound thoughts and beautifully realized details (all well-physicalized in the smartly-designed set by David Evans Morris). Hoeffel has set up a world in which two planes co-exist. Ordinary objects take on unexpected uses. Unsettling occurrences manage to seem routine until the writer skillfully flips them around in a way that enables the audience to appreciate a moment more deeply. In many instances, the writing sets something up and then subverts expectations, giving the audience an experience that might have been kept distanced otherwise. For example, for much of the piece, a "sex in a supply closet" scenario is set up as being somehow mundane. Then suddenly the characters involved have to deal with who they are in each others' lives. This sudden late call for meaning creates an unexpected sense of loss when that relationship dissolves.

But the writing also offers many unfinished or unclear moments, such as Arlene's affliction of "psychic" despair. She experiences waves of it that are strong enough to send her hiding in the women's bathroom yet are not strong enough to ever be explained or lead anywhere. It's a difficult role and Elizabeth Meriwether is quite affecting as the title character, Arlene Quail, but the character remains aggravatingly remote. Arlene never quite engages nor do the events within the play seem to have affected her. This sense of aloofness often overwhelms the many extraordinary events of the play.

Yet the play as it exists is approaching something and it would be wonderful to see that something to be specified. There is certainly humor and inventiveness and caring within this production. Per their mission statement, the play is as funny and strange as Clubbed Thumb would like, but the provocative element stills needs to be clarified.
Bamman's unflappable irritability gives the play an anchor, as does David Evans Morris' set, which puts Dean in a private office. Often, his muffled lines come from behind glass, which tells us that power in this play comes from the man in the smoky chamber.

It's crucial that "Quail" keep such a power balance defined, since Arlene's resistance to it is the central conflict. But the slow revelation of that conflict is what differentiates the play from so many other clockwatcher comedies.

Unlike most characters who hate their workaday lives, Arlene barely understands that she's unhappy. In a charming perfperf, Meriwether -- who wrote the recent office satire "The Mistakes Madeline Made" -- uses a sing-song delivery, confused pauses and spastic movements to suggest that Arlene is just blundering through.

Yet she is awakening all the same. Each of her bizarre encounters in the office -- from a tryst with a young client (Benjamin Pelteson) to a conversation with a restaurant owner (Zuleyma Guevara) about leukemia -- suggests ways in which life outside the office is more significant.

But since Arlene lacks self-awareness, these scenes initially seem like silly diversions instead of the impetus for change. At first we have no clue that the production will have any conflict, because there is no indication that anyone is unhappy or that there is any problem to be solved.

Therefore, when Arlene finally does start to yearn for human connection, sex and the ability to help people, many elements of the production take on new meaning.

Dean's cigarettes, their smoke seeping through an office whose windows have been painted shut, transform into a symbol of Arlene's emotional suffocation. Her supply-closet dalliances carry loneliness beneath their one-liners about cramped space. The play keeps a breezy tone, but it gets laced with sadness.

Really, though, that sadness was always there. "Quail" invites us to consider what we missed while we were chuckling at things we superficially understood.

Set, David Evans Morris; costumes, Jessica Pabst; lighting, Garin Marschall; original music and sound, Eric Shim; production stage manager, Sarah Bishop-Stone. Opened, reviewed June 18, 2006. Running time: 1 HOUR, 30 MIN.