



Tashya Valdevit and Leo Kittay in a scene from *Push Up 1-3* (photo © Joseph Van Harken)

nytheatre.com review

Martin Denton · September 18, 2004

People who work in big office buildings for giant monolithic corporations—and I know this, because I worked in one for thirteen years—do plenty of productive stuff; but too much time is spent posturing, primping, and planning: figuring out how to tell the boss so-and-so or when to go over his head or when to play politics behind her back. It's a sexy, scary, lonely world, and it's perfectly captured in Roland Schimmelpfennig's sharp and entertaining play *Push Up 1-3*, which is being given its New York premiere by the Desert Apple Theatre Company. In three connected vignettes, plus a neat prologue and epilogue, Schimmelpfennig, via his excellent translator Melanie Dreyer, reveals the machinations that seem to mean so much but ultimately amount to so little in the so-called "professional" lives of business people on the way up and down.

Each of the main scenes is an encounter between two sparring members of an unidentified but obviously large European enterprise. In the first segment, Angelica, a high-powered executive who is also the wife of the head of the company, is interviewing Sabine, a younger rising star in the firm, for a position at the Delhi office. In conversation that's barely civil and in monologues (delivered to us), the women expose their ambitions and their unhappinesses: they're alike, of course, and not satisfied with their lives. That Sabine is not going to get the job is a foregone conclusion, but the murky path toward resolution of this situation makes for compelling eavesdropping.

Even more intriguing is the rivalry/romance between Robert and Patricia in the next scene. They had a one-evening stand (in the boss's office, at the Christmas party last year); now they're supposed to work together on a new television commercial for whatever it is that this company sells. Again, cooperation seems impossible; what we have here, as someone once said, is a failure to communicate that's almost tragic in terms of the missed connections that it has brought about.

The final vignette is the strongest, introducing us to Hans and Frank, a boss and subordinate who are vying for the same position (that Delhi office job). Though an element of competition is certainly present, what's central here is the emptiness of the lives surrounding these allegedly meaningful careers. The older man spends hours every day on his exercise machine, bulking up and watching his diet (for whom?), while the other wiles away his nights on the Internet, downloading free porn and fantasizing about a Russian model named Natasha. Schimmelpfennig illuminates most sharply here the sad existences of his characters—the desperation and alienation shared by all six of these people who have seemingly surrendered some component of their humanity for the sake of "getting ahead."

And although this may not seem like radical new territory for exploration, *Push Up 1-3* manages to make it feel both fresh and pertinent by juxtaposing internal and external conversations in each scene. We get inside the heads and hearts of these folks, and see the truths that they cannot—or will not—acknowledge. Shrewdly, Schimmelpfennig frames this trio of dialogues with two monologues that point up, in stark contrast, another way to live—a way that lets some of the rest of the world into an office routine that, let's face it, can never be wholly nurturing or natural on its own. Heinrich and Maria, the two "blue collar" security personnel who deliver these two monologues, remind us that politics, power, and posturing are worthless without context.

Desert Apple Theatre Company is to be commended for finding this play and showing it to New York audiences. I've often said that we don't see enough contemporary work from other countries, and every time I see something as interesting and relevant as this play from Germany I feel compelled to reiterate that message. This production, directed by Cynthia Dillon, is forthright and stylish (though a repeated staging technique of having the actors "pose" during the monologue portions of the three central scenes feels a bit forced and arty). The design by Nicholas R. Keslake and Todd Field is simple and appropriate. The ensemble—Ken Bolden (Hans), Cate Brewer (Maria), Chris Campbell (Angelica), Steven Hess (Frank), Brian Hotaling (Heinrich), Leo Kittay (Robert), Thea McCartan (Sabine), and Tashya Valdevit (Patricia)—all do fine work.