

The ArtsCenter mounts its best short-play festival yet

By Byron Woods



Photo by Adam Graetz

Julie Oliver and Fred Corlett in *Couples Therapy* at the ArtsCenter

In a roadside diner, two solemn middle-aged women come to a Raymond Carver-style reckoning. In a dirty prison cell, a torture victim teaches a new inmate a lesson he'll never forget. In an upscale living room, two women parse out racial division and mistrust. On what could easily be a street in the same neighborhood, a white policeman and a young African-American man face the same issues by night.

These are four worthy evenings of theater, condensed, somehow, into 10 minutes each. In its 14th season, **The ArtsCenter's 10 by 10 in the Triangle** is mounting the strongest collection of 10-minute plays in its history. Fully half of these 10 plays rate four stars or higher; three more merit three and a half stars. When director Jon Jory, who founded one of the first 10-minute theater festivals in the country, called the genre "a bolt of theatrical lightning," this is what he meant.

What made for the quantum leap among this year's offerings? Look, first, to the panel of 15 readers that selected the scripts, down from 28 last year and 36 the year before. The difference is evident on stage. Though levity marks four of the 10 selected works, gone is the low-grade sketch comedy seen in prior outings. Instead, a sophisticated collection of scripts focuses — whether in earnest or with tongue in cheek—on present-day social and political issues, including race, capital punishment and the banking and housing crises.

In the strongest work, playwright Allan Bates' *Two Mothers at a Roadside Café*, director Gregor McElvogue has actors Barbette Hunter and Page Purgar face each other across the chasm of a diner table, playing two women coping with different losses. Hunter and Purgar also appear, with actors Fred

10 BY 10 IN THE
TRIANGLE

4 Stars

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Through July 26

Corlett and Lazarus Simmons, in L. Robert Westeen's *As We Knew It*. Under Hope Alexander's direction and Lawruh Lindsey's lights, the four actors give harrowing, interlaced portraits of victims of religious or political intolerance across the ages.

In James McLindon's *Broken*, actor Shaun Schneider and director David Berberian's steely take on a political prisoner caught in a ruthless game of manipulation makes for a gripping, gritty prison drama. The stakes are just as high when John Allore's brash white cop encounters—and then recognizes— Alexander Jackson's African-American character in Rich Rubin's *Stop/Frisk*. And a different racial war of nerves plays out in Rich Espey's *Alban's Garden*, under Brook North's direction, between Julie Oliver and Hunter as two neighbors meeting for the first time after violence rocks an upscale neighborhood.

Among other offerings, director Monet Marshall gives the American banking crisis the silent film treatment in *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?* Though Allore, Simmons and actor Leigha Vilen are funny and engaging, Jack Karp's script seems incomplete, ending in mid-story, before the historical comeuppance that followed.

More rewarding is *The Third Person*, playwright Dan Borengasser's imaginative take on literary characters in real life, directed by Jules Odendahl-James. In a costume by Laura Ramsdell, Vilen strikes a young-Katharine-Hepburn pose when she meets her story's narrator (Corlett) in the flesh, not a moment too soon. Corlett and Oliver, veteran actors both, also anchor playwright Matt Crowley's diverting *Couples Therapy*, a fun variation on the familiar interplay of a bickering husband and wife.

The right mix of laughs and thoughtful works, carefully directed and enacted, makes this year's edition of *10 by 10* more than a guilty pleasure.

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