

Stage Review: Music, film, dance, poetry make a varied stage show



CHRISTOPHER RAWSON
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It's always my practice to time a show, just in case its length makes a difference. But how do you time a smorgasbord?

'Life. And other one-man shows'

- **Where:** Cup-a-Jo Productions at Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre, Jackman Building, 542 Penn Ave., Downtown.
- **When:** Through Jan. 28; Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m. (Gallery open at 7).
- **Tickets:** \$8-\$10; 412-334-3126.

From start (three short films) to finish (Joanna Lowe's six monologues plus music and dance), "Life. And other one-man shows" lasts just an hour and 50 minutes. But, billed as "a multi-media event," it includes poems and paintings, which you can savor in the lobby or buy, along with a music CD and DVD of the films. So savoring the poems and films extends the event -- to its benefit.

Sarah E.J. Williams' "Points of Grace" is an envelope of three poems neatly printed on cards. In "Exodus," she writes, in part: "We have / already gone / to the hot side of the sun. ... We know / what waits for us there / to scrape our heart / with small, sharp teeth." And in "Forsythia": "I am hiding in a self / three years past due, on my chest / a stone, stone, another stone / trapped between inhale and exhale." Good stuff.

Matt Reed's poetry chapbook, "An Ergonomics of Suspicion," includes a

dozen pieces. He is in love with ornate words. But "21 December 2001" works: "America, all my friends are unemployed. / I'm the only coward with a job. ... My blessings are a decent set of paperbacks / a Gideon King James / and 14,000 pages of unwritten autobiography."

The short films are "Taking Turns," by Lowe, directed by Eric Sipple, a painful encounter in the theater's lobby of former lovers, feelingly played by J.P. Patrick and Allison Cahill. "L'Attente," written and directed by Lucas McNelly, is an intriguingly spare scene of waiting in a diner. And "Tomorrow," written and directed by Sipple, is a drama of reaction to a suicide.

In contrast, the play, by producer/director Lowe (the Jo in Cup-a-Jo), is like a group of poems that don't add up. Partly that's because she wears her pain on her sleeve, telling us in the program it's about "my attempt at watering a garden fertile with tears in the hope that beauty will flower where broken hearts were once buried."

Then an emcee (Gregory Caridi) introduces six monologues, prescribing an emotional mood for accompanying guitarist Stephen Vesolich. Dancers choreographed by Lisa Laura Lucci further over-illustrate the monologues, which feel written to vague emotions rather than arising out of character or situation. We don't know where these people come from or why, and the concluding attempt to give the emcee a "real" identity outside the fiction is as artificial as it shows the event has been.

It feels self-obsessed and self-conscious, too rarely fusing character and language. Still, like the whole evening, the monologues are a smorgasbord, so there are some passages to savor.

Overall, I best liked Vesolich's guitar and the poems.

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