

Exhibitionism – *Local Arts Reviews*

By Ada Calhoun



WAR: Conflict in the Cubicles

The Off Center, through July 1

Running time: 2 hrs

Downtown, "RAW Is WAR" adorns the Frank Erwin Center screen, hyping a WWF battle that contrasts strikingly in energy and showmanship with the new offering from the Rude Mechanicals and their resident director-playwright Kirk Lynn. Influential on both is also the Hobbesian philosophy that "the condition of mankind is the condition of war ... everyone against everyone." While wrestling reduces such a pessimistic-yet-convincing perspective to its most grunting simplicity (just ask Barthes), the Rude Mechs bring out their big guns (rough wit, deft timing, and ample smarts) to socio-philosophize away at the viewpoint in all its messy particularity.

War begins with a game invented by American GIs in WWII. One player starts with a proposition, on the order of "You live in the United States." The other player follows with two options: "If you live in the United States, you either live in the country or the city." The next offers two options forking from one of the previous two, as in: "If you live in the country, fine;

but if you live in the city, you either work in a factory or an office." And so on; the players continue to expand the options infinitely. As in life, whoever hits a dead end loses. This Kierkegaardian party trick manifests itself subtly throughout the play in fantasies that the office-dwelling characters employ to get by day-to-day.

The main plot revolves around the attempts of a complicated, tenuously related family to help the glitter-drenched Sister with an unspoken crisis. A blind, leather-clad man with a penchant for anal sex figures in somehow, as does profuse coffee consumption, a gun, and a pile of money. One stellar subplot casts the ever-appealing Lana Lesley as an office chick who (in between Xeroxing her band flyers) falls for the fax machine ghost, a former Union boss only she can see. Sarah Richardson flutters in and out as the over-caffeinated Mother.

With the chilling late-night-elevator-ding aesthetic of Cindy Sherman's art film *Office Killer*, the boxed-in frustration of recent flick *Office Space*, and dance scenes smacking of a more erudite *Drew Carey Show*, *War* fits right into the new wave of cubicle commentary. At the *War* office's heart is the "Big Contest," the boss' compulsion, a game it becomes the sole responsibility of all workers to play. A metaphor for our individual quests for meaning and success, the Contest showcases the fanciful visions each worker has for a better world.

As a spectacle, *War* has style for miles, boasting pre-show hip-hop dancer Anderson Mills, San Antonio DJ Aleph's live soundscapes, and plentiful slides. Light bulbs dangle over chairs to the sides of the stage, creating an ominous brand of waiting/interrogation room in which the characters await their next scene. Awash with cute, mysterious moments, as when certain characters are handed a bottle of water and piece of fruit by a company member before leaving the stage, *War* is so rich in such detail that proves too dense to absorb all at once if one has trouble (to borrow a term from office culture) multitasking.

War is steeped in words, and certain lines sound more suited to the printed page than to speech. Much here is highly conceptual and fairly cryptic, but as is so often the case with Lynn's work and that of the Rude Mechs, humor trumps pretension. Even at their most literary and most obscure, the group manages to make genuinely original observations on conflict and escapism while couching such deep thought in the energetic realm of absurdist comedy. Yet another testament to the troupe's innovation and charm, *War* is hip in the best sense of the word.