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There's plenty of heat -- and some light -- in 'Love's Fire'

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You'll probably still need the Cliffs Notes.

The seven celebrity dramatists behind "Love's Fire" -- Eric Bogosian, Ntozake Shange, Marsha Norman, Tony Kushner, William Finn, Wendy Wasserstein and John Guare -- don't pretend to illuminate the Shakespearean sonnets they've looked to for inspiration. ("Shut up! I hate the sonnets! Boring, boring, boring!" one of Kushner's characters admits during a particularly hilarious rant. Obviously, in-depth literary analysis is not the point.)

Instead, the playwrights do here what playwrights often do in short pieces: They riff. They experiment. They make jokes. They use outrageous language. They craft characters and plot lines that would never withstand full-length treatment, and they go for broke. Sometimes, they manage to say something profound.

A production of "Love's Fire" that opened Wednesday at the University of Notre Dame captures every bit of that renegade spirit, while showcasing some of the best student acting -- some of the best acting, period -- this critic has seen in a long time.

Director Siiri Scott and company have taken a huge risk with this material, and not just because the subject matter ranges from rough sex to casual sex to adulterous sex, with plenty of fantasy, Freudian analysis, gender politics, betrayal and agnosticism thrown in for spice.

No, the real trick here is making the unreal, the impossible, the beyond-all-realm-of-human-understanding -- for these are the short play's raison d'etre -- live believably on stage. These young actors have done it, by remembering the basics: Listening. Reacting. Pursuing objectives. Raising the stakes.

The only times their performances falter are when the scripts do. Wasserstein's "Waiting for Philip Glass," for instance, is a tiresome exercise in name-dropping and elitist urban angst, while Bogosian's "Bitter Sauce," so promising in its early moments as a grimacing bride (Kathryn Weil) drowns her sorrows with bad Scotch, ultimately has more trash than wit. But when the writing is solid, as with Kushner's crazy-man-on-the-couch tragicomedy "Terminating," the ensemble lands one fully realized moment after another.

Like the sonnets themselves, "Love's Fire" is in some ways smaller than the sum of its parts. The evening doesn't quite hold together, despite the cast's unity and an elegant and economical approach to design. Kevin Dreyer's set includes a bank of video monitors on which, between plays, we see rehearsal footage while voice-overs recite the sonnets in question. Because the relationship between the poems and the plays is so tenuous in most cases, the device isn't especially useful -- the video interludes simply slow the production down, and the blank screens we see the rest of the time seem like a missed opportunity.

Even after the play's memorable finale, a poetic and sometimes funny rumination on the artistic/spiritual impulse, some viewers might wonder what "Love's Fire" is trying to say. The message might be muddled, but the heat -- especially as it radiates from the Washington Hall stage -- is impossible to ignore.

The production continues through Sunday.

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