



Peter Schaaf

Leslie B. Dunner conducted Beethoven, Ellington, and his and others' arrangements of spirituals in Monday night's concert at the Mann Center for the Performing Arts.

really, folks, it's not that hard to get to the Mann.

Walk-up tickets are available the night of any performance; the lowest indoor fee is \$20.

But the better deal — if admittedly inconvenient — continues to be those 1,500 free lawn seats (otherwise \$8 bucks) available two to three weeks prior to a performance by phoning 215-893-1999.

Every Wednesday, the Mann runs ads in *The Inquirer* and the *Philadelphia Daily News* giving its freebie ticket/performance schedule. Example: You have until Friday to order up to four free lawn seats for the July 5 performance.

Same practice as the orchestra's former coupon offerings — only this year, you don't have to clip a coupon. Just make a phone call.

I agree that the ticket policy could be a lot simpler, but until it is: Hundreds and hundreds of freebies and affordable seats are going to waste.

No, I don't work for this orchestra.

But yes, we should stand by our Mann.

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Review Theater

'Best of' from the Brick

By Douglas J. Keating
INQUIRER THEATER CRITIC

Selected from the Brick Playhouse's monthly Independent Theater series, the developmental theater's annual "The Best of IT" program is, by consequence, usually a themeless potpourri. This year's program is much less so. Two of the five short plays are by one author and have similar subjects, and there is a commonality in three brief monologues by a local actor.

Not only are *Release* and *Sizing Him Up* by Michael Cheikin similar, they are the two most arresting pieces on the bill. The playwright mentions in a program note that he has worked at Inglis House (a care facility for patients with physical disabilities), and both plays concern young people with physical disabilities.

Sizing Him Up is a revealing comic sketch. *Release* is a compactly written, affecting drama about the devastating effect multiple sclerosis can have on a romantic relationship.

Cheikin presents a woman in her 20s who is coming to a crisis in her quickly advancing disease. Although she is using a walker, she knows she will soon be wheelchair-bound and need more care than her husband can provide. So while she still can make decisions and still has the ability to carry them out, she lays out a plan to her objecting husband that will, as much as possible, relieve him of the emotional and financial burdens of her illness.

Cheikin flashes back from the painful present to scenes that show the couple in happier, pre-illness times, and the result is that *Release* is both movingly sad and touchingly triumphant in its depiction of the woman's courage and tough thoughtfulness. Stacy Gallese Haebel offers a thoroughly convincing portrayal of the woman, getting just right the halting speech, the involuntary nervous movements, and the tentative steps of the multiple sclerosis patient, as well as persuasively projecting her inner strength.

Sizing Him Up means to show that the physically disabled are as capable as anyone of thinking, talking about, and even having sex. The piece, a raunchily humorous conversation between two women in wheelchairs that begins with a frank evaluation of the physical attributes of a newly arrived male patient and evolves into a discussion of their feelings toward sex, is engagingly acted by Rose Evans and Laurie Brown. In both this and *Release*, Cheikin's writing and Mark Cofta's direction infuse the disabled with a presence and vitality that draw the audience into their lives.

The Best of IT

Sizing Him Up and *Release* by Michael Cheikin, directed by Mark Cofta; *Today's Special* by Linda Lough, directed by Neill Hartley; *The Gift* by Cat Hasson West, directed by Tracy Cross; *The Storyteller* by Dan West, directed by Domenick Scudera; excerpts from *Spin Cycle* by John Lumia. Production organized by Bill McKinlay; lighting by Dan West.

The cast: John Lumia, Rose Evans, Laurie Brown, Kelly Jennings, Marianne Ahern, Garrett Lee Hendricks, David Holland, Kate Pony, Stacy Gallese Haebel, Bill Edwards, Domenick Scudera, Nicole deRosa, Scott Wolfson, Carol Graham.

Playing at: Wilma Theater, Broad and Spruce Streets, 7 p.m. Sunday. Tickets are \$12. Information: 215-546-7824.

The interact monologues by John Lumia are vivid snapshots of dysfunctional male characters, written and performed in the in-your-face style popularized by Eric Bogosian. In this excerpt from a developing piece called *Spin Cycle*, all three characters come colorfully and humorously to life as Lumia becomes a disoriented street person, a ranting ticket scalper, and a weirdo running on in a monotone about how Disney is taking over the earth.

Two pieces on the program were written not for the IT monthly series but for last fall's Fringe Festival. *Today's Special* was performed at lunch in an Old City restaurant and is, not surprisingly, set in a restaurant. A comedy by Linda Lough about a woman meeting for the first time a man she met on the Internet is easy to take, written and acted with the naturalistic feel of a conversation heard at the next table.

The Gift by Cat Hasson West was performed as one of the brief skits on the Dead End Tour of Old City that the Brick developed for the Fringe. I didn't think much of the tour, or of this skit at the Fringe, and seeing it done in a theater instead of on a dark street doesn't change my opinion. There isn't much to this ill-written bit of Grand Guignol about murder, skin lotion (the two are connected), and mother-daughter bonding in colonial Philadelphia.

The Storyteller by Dan West is a parody of an old-fashioned fairy tale. The story of a boy who gets lost in the woods isn't particularly original or imaginative, but has some humorous touches and comes off well in Domenick Scudera's campy production.

This year's Best of IT, which debuted last weekend at the Brick Playhouse on South Street, will move to the Wilma Theater on Sunday for a final performance.