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## The Establishment takes its lumps

By Ted Hadley

Jun 16, 2007

**O**ne of Buffalo's small treasures is Rust Belt Books.

Jammed into an Allentown storefront are hundreds of garage-sale books on every topic to hunt through, plus other dusty volumes, some piled high, others askew, books you don't need -- but have to have. You could spend hours there.

There's art, news about summer concerts, poetry readings and the upcoming Buffalo Infringement Festival, and it's the place to find the newsletter of something called the Society for a Subliminal State or read the latest from the World Socialist Web site.

But now there's activity in the store's sweltering, 30-seat back room, specifically Subversive Theatre Collective's second installment of "protest plays," a series of eight, maybe 10 one-acts by mostly out-of-town writers casually assembled under the intriguing title "Subversive Shorts." The collective's artistic director, Kurt "Vile" Schneiderman, advises that playgoers should hurry to see these new works "before Homeland Security shuts us down."

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Well, in truth they're not all that anti-anything. Yes, the usual suspects take their lumps: President Bush, Vice President Cheney, practically any Republican dating back to Ronald Reagan, lawyers, the Feds -- anyone with the slightest of Establishment leanings. In the end though, the night of "Subversive Shorts" -- and producer Schneiderman will shudder at the thought -- nearly comes off "fair and balanced."

Whenever you have eight plays and more than 20 actors and directors involved, the slate can be risky. That's what has happened here. Schneiderman says that the night includes "allegory, farce, black comedy, absurdism, docu-drama and good old-fashioned, hard-hitting drama." You'll have to search for some of those. But, except for one or two tiresome plays, the night proves to be an entertaining mix.

Subversive's cast boasts some Buffalo theater veterans -- Mary Loftus, Bill Schmidt, Kelly Beuth, Keith Elkins, Joey Bucheker -- and some fine new talent -- Daniel Sterlace, Hasheen DeBerry, Joseph Fratello and Heather Fangsrud. Directors include Schmidt, Katie White, John Reich, Lara Haberberger, Virginia Brannon, Schneiderman himself and Diane Cammarata. There's plenty of experience here; that helps to sometimes make much out of little.

Actor Schmidt has written a preachy trilogy, "Don't Hate the Messenger," and two spin-offs, about the Iraq War, social security and eminent domain. "W" and his administration take some hits, no surprise, but there is nothing new about these plays. There's sadness, though, and anger, particularly in the Iraqi segment.

"Please Remove This Stuffed Animal From My Head" is so dumb it's fun and does court surprise. "A Random Act" is tongue-in-cheek, nicely done by young DeBerry and diva Loftus; its "feel-my-pain" premise is full of comic social twists. Hearing Mary Loftus spit a derogatory "liberals" at play's end is worth a wait.

"The Death of Socrates in America" explores contemporary justice systems; "Lindsay" is another Iraq horror; "Eff You" is a clever stream-of-consciousness few minutes about profanity and the societal impact on hearing certain oaths; and "Capitalization" is an interminable, almost intolerable piece on union-bashing.

There are no sets, few props, just political and social issue artists at work. Blue-collar theater lives.

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>Theater Review

"Subversive Shorts"

Review: 2 1/2 stars (out of four)

One-act plays produced by Subversive Theatre Collective through June 30 in Rust Belt Books, 202 Allen St. For more information, call 408-0499.