

The Baltimore Sun > Entertainment > Music > Clef Notes & Drama Queens



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Rep Stage explores teen secrets, sexual identity in provocative 'Speech & Debate'

This spring, plays with gay characters and issues have been sprouting up all over our area. Not that there's anything wrong with that -- I'd say it's a case of fortuitous, even fabulous, serendipity.



Closing recently were stagings of Paula Vogel's bittersweet "The Long Christmas Ride Home" at Single Carrot Theatre and Adam Bock's offbeat comedy "Swimming in the Shallows" at Iron Crow Theatre. Still on the boards for another few weeks at the Vagabond Players is John Guare's still-potent "Six Degrees of Separation."

And Rep Stage is closing its season in provocative form with a dynamic and telling production of Stephen Karam's "Speech & Debate," which has much to say about what it means to be young and gay and alone.

Propelled by a darkly comic streak, Karam's fast-paced play concerns three high-school outsiders. What they have most in common is a deep-set need to know if anyone else out is out there like them - and if anyone else out there might actually like them.

There's Diwata (a name practically begging to be mangled by others, especially clueless adults). She's a bit overweight and seriously over-eager. Determined to be an actress, despite the unwillingness of drama teachers to notice her vast talent, Diwata finds an ideal outlet online, unaware of just how out-there a blog can be. In short order, her life entwines with those of two others at her school in Salem, Ore.

Solomon is a 16-year-old would-be reporter fascinated with the local scandals involving anti-gay rights Republican politicians outed for relationships with young males. Solomon thinks this hypocrisy would make a great story for his student paper.



Things get much more complicated, though, when ...

the possibility of an inappropriate teacher-teen relationship turns up at the school. Enter Howie, the transfer student who's openly gay, but not ready for everything about himself to be known.

Karam's taut script, note-perfect in the way it captures the jagged speech patterns of the young, packs a lot of complex, sometimes uncomfortable matters into 90 minutes.

"Speech & Debate" - the title refers to a school club that provides an outlet of sorts for the three misfits -- opens a window into how contemporary teens see themselves and adults; how they perceive and categorize dangers; how they recognize or compartmentalize sexual identity; how they keep and betray secrets.

These kids don't really know as much as they think they do about the world, but they know something is not quite right, and they want to learn more. And, as Solomon does, they'll just "google it" until something starts to make sense.

Karam doesn't impose solutions or moral guidance on the story; questions are allowed to hang in the air. And he lets loose a wicked sense of humor at the right moments to generate an experience that is as entertaining as it is edgy.

The Rep Stage production has the benefit of a uniformly appealing, persuasive cast, directed by Eve Muson, who has the action flowing smoothly across James Fouchard's sleek set.

Florrie Bagel gives a deliciously vibrant performance as Diwata, making the most of every opportunity to burst into painful ballads at her Casio keyboard (the occasional songs are comic highlights of the show), or recite speeches from "The Crucible" (frequent references to that tale of rumor and persecution carry extra significance here).

Bagel manages to convey the frantic, ready-for-her-"Glee"-close-up side of Diwata as winningly as the wounded, unsure woman-to-be inside.

As the nerdy-needy Solomon, Sam Ludwig likewise does multidimensional work (costume designer Melanie Clark gives him just the right touch of fashion obliviousness). In the scene when the protective covering is suddenly pulled off of Solomon's inner life, Ludwig proves especially affecting.

Parker Drown captures the sureness and shyness of Howie in a nicely detailed, thoroughly natural performance. His contributions to the musical flourishes have an extra kick, too.

Karen Novack ably rounds out the cast in the play's two, brief adult roles - a teacher and a certain type of self-serving journalist we've all known (and have probably heard at least once on NPR).

Performances of "Speech & Debate" continue through Sunday at the Horowitz Visual and Performing Arts Center, Howard Community College.

Note that a panel discussion, "Young and Gay in Howard County," will be held at 12:30 p.m. Saturday before the matinee. Colette Roberts, founder of Howard County Parents, Families and Friends of Gays and Lesbians will lead the session, addressing such topics as coming out and bullying.

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