

Look Quick

ETC's 'Off-Center' staged a wonderful double-bill, but now it's time for the next show

REVIEW BY RICK FENDER

Sorry is the word I'd use to describe my feelings about writing this review of the Off-Center/On-Stage series at Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati (ETC). Most specifically, I'm sorry if you didn't see last week's presentation of two one-acts, *Skirmishes* by Elizabeth Logan Harris and *Whisperings* by Boo Friedmann. They only ran for a week, closing last Sunday. You've missed 'em.

That's the tough part of running a theater like ETC, which bills itself as "your premiere theatre." They're in the business of producing shows not seen before. It's a tough task from a marketing perspective, since people are much more likely to turn out to see a play that's been staged elsewhere and been validated by other audiences.

During its regular season, of course, ETC has a bit more chance to select shows by well-known playwrights, such as Lee Blessing or Warren Leight, and to let their shows run for several weeks. Often it's word of mouth — people hearing from someone else about a good show or (occasionally) reading a review and taking a chance — that cranks up attendance.

This year's Off-Center series is presenting shows by local writers, so familiarity is even less likely. And with a limited budget for marketing, it's tough to get the word out. You pretty much have to take it on faith, buying a ticket in advance and hoping you'll see something interesting. Occasionally, you'll find a gem. Last week I found two.

Skirmishes was a powerful, poignant but amusingly told story about Sadie (Kristin Burkhead), who wrestles with her role as a contemporary woman by meeting the specters of several female ancestors, who deprecatingly call themselves the "Sinclair Hysterical Society."

Brilliantly staged by Gyllian Raby (who directed *Sabina's Splendid Brain*, the highlight of last year's series), *Skirmishes* was a quickly paced but provocative one-act drama that could easily expand to two. The strong cast included the playwright as Meta, a woman living in Victorian Cincinnati who wanted more from her life and career; Mardi Kring Perry, Naomi Bailis (who soloed as Sabina last year) and Sara Michelle Smith as Sinclair women from three different centuries who audition members for their "hysterical" women's society; and Chuck Haungs,

who seamlessly doubled as Meta's philandering husband and Sadie's solicitous, smothering spouse.

Whisperings, the other one-act on the evening's bill, was a story of a young woman who flippantly dismisses her Jewish heritage, but then can't escape it after a conversation with her grandmother, a survivor of the Holocaust. Playwright Friedmann plays the central role of narrator and several characters — including her grandmother and a young boy who drew pictures of butterflies — accompanied by five dancers who evoke moods from joy and grief to terror and oppression. It's a powerful piece, enhanced by Michael Burnham's focused direction, and underscored by Friedmann's varied (she handles several accents effortlessly), heartfelt and courageous acting.

Both

Skirmishes and *Whisperings* showed little evidence of being workshop productions. Their work-in-progress nature was easily overcome by effective lighting, diligent rehearsal and a clear hand on the directorial rudder. Either show would find an audience if it were returned to ETC's stage for a longer run.

Of course, the Off-Center series can be something of a crap shoot. The previous week's production of Ron Mielech's *The Four "H" Club* was as dissatisfying as the two one-acts were memorable. An odd and intentionally unrealistic story about a totally dysfunctional family baring their quirks for the purpose of inflicting pain on one another, the play failed to engage me at any level: writing, acting or directing.

But that's the risk one takes in seeing shows as they are being refined and developed. You have one more chance with this series, and while I haven't seen it, I can only urge you to get a ticket quickly to ETC's final Off-Center show, a staged reading of a new musical, *Green Gables*, based on the classic children's novel, *Anne of Green Gables*. With a strong cast (including Broadway veteran Pam Myers and local professional Deb Gardler) and one of the area's best directors (Drew Fracher), the odds are it'll be good. But you don't have time to wait to hear from somebody else.

I'm not going to be sorry. I'll be there.

GREEN GABLES, presented by Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati, runs through Sunday.

