

We next discover Peggy is recovering in a hospital, her two pals popping in occasionally to check on her. Or are they figments of her imagination? In another scene, we view Peggy at home, with her husband (Barry Saltzman) and two teenage children (Coronado Romero and Allison Mattox). The script periodically backtracks to the accident to reveal new details. Black ponders how we attempt to come to terms with traumatic incidents and their aftermaths.

Hajduk holds our interest as a woman struggling to piece together her scattered memories. Robbins and Sommer are amusing as a closeted lesbian couple. Black's staging of the labyrinthine events would benefit from more lucidity. The nonstop shifting of furniture and props becomes cumbersome and isn't conducive to narrative flow. The highly promising script warrants a more polished rendition.

Presented by Playwrights 6 at and with the Open Fist Theatre, 6209 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood. May 4–June 9. "Drive": Wed., 8 p.m. "Fernando Richardson's Treacherous Brain": Thu., 8 p.m. (323) 882-6912. www.openfist.org.

BACKSTAGE REVIEWS

Fernando Richardson's Treacherous Brain

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Drive and Fernando Richardson's Treacherous Brain
Playwrights 6 at and with the Open Fist Theatre
Reviewed by Les Spindle

May 11, 2011

Two world-premiere plays presented in repertory take clever looks at the ways subconscious memories can have unexpected effects on one's current emotional equilibrium.

Monica Trasandes' "Fernando Richardson's Treacherous Brain" is a wistful romantic dramedy, exploring what might happen when we reconsider roads not taken in life. The entertaining piece also touches upon issues of cultural re-assimilation and the myriad shadings of romantic love. The titular character (Roberto Montesinos), an immigrant from Paraguay residing in L.A., undergoes surgery to remove a brain tumor, as his devoted wife (Amy Chaffee), friend (Mark Slater), and doting mother (Paula Fins) rally to support him.

The surgery appears to have been successful, but Fernando soon begins babbling about a past encounter in Argentina with a woman named Elisa, whose life was apparently in danger during the nation's Dirty War. How much truth is there in his ranting? How much of it is merely incoherency that's expected following a major brain operation? The rewards in this disarming and sweetly poignant play derive from its unfolding surprises and astute character observations.

Director Andre Barron achieves a crisp interplay, capitalizing on Trasandes' smart dialogue. Montesinos delights as the central character, radiating charm and sly humor. Chaffee and Slater give warm portrayals, earning our empathy as their characters' personal stakes in the unfolding revelations become clearer. Fins is likable and droll as the quick-witted matriarch. The spirited Lyn Ross elicits fun from the incidental role of an outspoken nurse, and Karla Zamudio scores strongly in the brief but crucial role of the mysterious Elisa.

Writer-director Laura Black's pensive "Drive" keeps us on our toes as we attempt to make sense of its surrealistic narrative, which constantly shifts between present and past, blurring the line between real and imagined. Peggy (Jane Hajduk) is the driver during an excursion with her friends (Beth Robbins and Susan Sommer) when an automobile crash occurs.