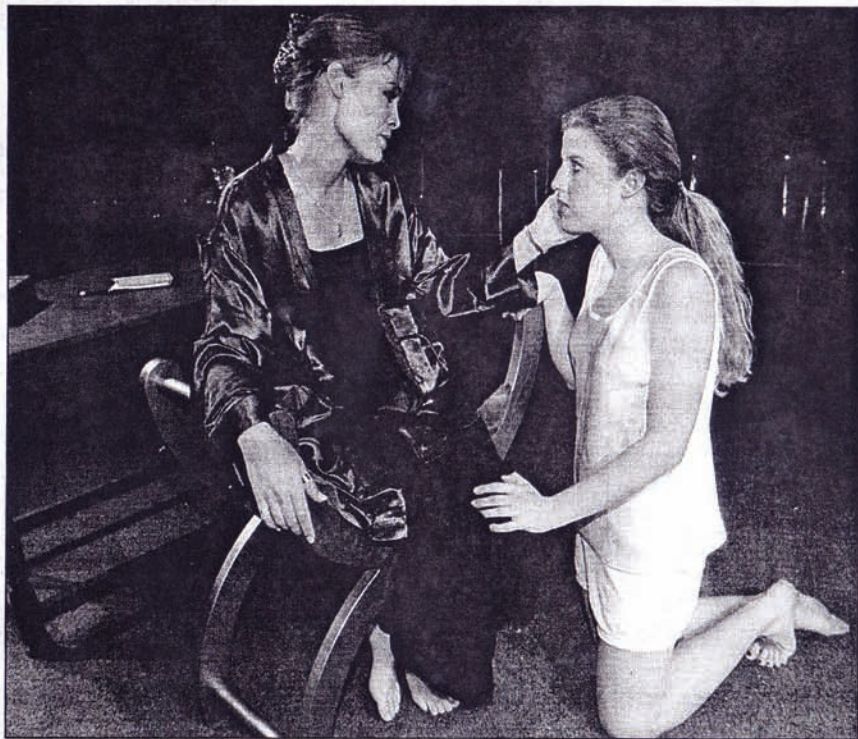


# A Flawed—but Funny—Trio



GERALDINE WILKINS-KASINGA / Los Angeles Times

In "Ismene," Kimberly M. Fisher, left, and Jami McCoy bring the legend of Oedipus' "other" daughter to life in the 20th century.

By T.H. McCULLOH  
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Evenings of one-act plays almost always have a wide span of quality, and "Seduction, Monkeys and Coffee" at Santa Ana's Hunger Artists Theatre is no exception. The biggest surprise here is that the only non-original play, David Ives' "Words, Words, Words," is the least successful of the three entries.

"Words," along with other Ives one-acts, has become a staple of small theaters and college drama departments in recent years. (It's also currently part of an Ives program running at Westwood's Geffen Playhouse.)

It's a simplistic sketch about three chimpanzees trying to fulfill the old scientific premise that if you put some monkeys in a room with typewriters, eventually they will type "Hamlet" as Shakespeare wrote it—an interesting idea, but the result is a one-joke play.

Under Eric Hamme's bustling direction here, the play is as random as the premise it's based on, but Alex Laverde as chimp Swift gives the action enough spark to almost make the skit more than it is. Jeff Soll and Jamie Sweet are effective, but Laverde's video intro is pointless juvenilia, signifying nothing.

The plays that follow are much more interesting and worthwhile.

"Hairtriggers," written and directed by Adam Martin, is a verbal riff on the subject of coffee; its setting gives it style.

In an abandoned desert coffee shop after a bank robbery, four very vocal gangsters hole up with the only loot they have left, a coffee machine and some

Please see ONE-ACTS, F31

LOS ANGELES TIMES



GERALDINE WILKINS-KASINGA / Los Angeles Times

Alex Laverde, left, Jamie Sweet and Jeff Soll ape chimpanzees in David Ives' "Words, Words, Words."

## ONE-ACTS

Continued from F30

coffee. All of the dialogue pertains to said machine, said coffee and the cups from which they drink it. At first glance it all seems pointless, but the author's very funny sendup of the genre soon shows its true colors, and the film noir performances by Kelly Flynn, Dru Obade, Mark Coyan and Jami McCoy keep it fresh and lively.

The third and most ambitious entry is Flynn's "Ismene," directed by the playwright. It brings the Greek legend of Oedipus' other daughter (besides Antigone) into the 20th century.

It looks very much a modern Greek story, with Ismene in silk

pajamas, and her current love, Cassandra (now a female television news reporter) in sexy lingerie. It is the night of Creon's murder of Antigone, and Ismene's conniving for power destroys Cassandra the blabbing news hound and shows Ismene for the control freak she is.

Flynn's script is lucid, and its minor updatings are clever. He also directs it well, although it would be interesting to see the script in the hands of another, who might see stronger dramatic values beneath Flynn's text.

A stronger cast would help too. Mark Coyan is excellent as Felix, Creon's oily, manipulating chief of staff, but Kimberly M. Fisher, as Ismene, in spite of a well-formed portrait and a stylish presentation, doesn't have enough inner fire to

make Ismene tower over the others. McCoy as Cassandra has the same problem, with even less of the inner energy necessary to bring such a classic character to life with the urgency required.

■ "Seduction, Monkeys and Coffee," Hunger Artists, 204 E. 4th St., Santa Ana. Thursday-Saturday, 8:30 p.m.; Sunday, 7:30 p.m. \$10-\$12. Ends June 21. (714) 547-9100. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes.

Alex Laverde	Swift
Jeff Soll	Milton
Jamie Sweet	Katie
Kelly Flynn	Stoke
Dru Obade	Dixie
Mark Coyan	Jagz/Felix
Jami McCoy	Wanda/Cassandra
Kimberly M. Fisher	Ismene

A Hunger Artists production of three one-act plays: "Words, Words, Words" by David Ives; "Hairtriggers" by Adam Martin; "Ismene" by Kelly Flynn; "Scene" by Jeff Soll. Music by Melissa Petro. Lighting: Jeff Johnson. Stage manager: Damon Hill.

ORANGE COUNTY

LOS ANGELES TIMES • THURSDAY, JUNE 4, 1998

# CALENDAR WEEKEND

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Dornan vs. Chumbawamba p10  
Phoebe frowns, Alarcon smiles p21

Where Dean Koontz eats p32  
Chris Isaak: Call us? p24

The loco opera of Gomez-Peña p22  
The MacGyver of performance art p28

VOL. 3 NO. 40 JUNE 12-18 1999 WWW.OCWEEKLY.COM

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## NEW THEATER REVIEWS

### NEVILLE'S ISLAND

Great premise: four middle-management geeks on a team-building exercise in England's Lake District end up stranded on an inaccessible inlet with insufficient resources or the gray matter to hang on comfortably until they are rescued. Director Andrew Traister has demonstrated a flair for corporate comedies before (last year's *Below the Belt* was a gem), and although there's nary a fax machine in sight, a workplace satire is precisely what *Neville's Island* is.



Neville's Island

Our four managers are "Dilbert"-ish archetypes: Neville (played by James Winker), the morale-boosting team leader; Roy (Don Lee Sparks), the nature lover who is back at work after suffering first a breakdown and then a religious conversion; Angus (Curtis Armstrong), the resourceful nerd ripe for being screwed over; and Gordon (Mark Ryan), the upwardly mobile poisonous snake. A more cynical playwright than Tim Firth might have turned the situation into a true test of Darwinism, complete with survival-of-the-fittest-inspired bloodshed. Firth dangerously allows self-pity to raise its head and tries to humanize these characters. It's the play's only misstep, and Traister occasionally lets these sequences drag the play into the ooze.

Otherwise, *Neville's Island* is a blast with some very funny goings-on and a great sight gag toward the end. Major congrats to set and lighting designer Kent Dorsey, who built a swampy inlet, complete with a water-drenched shoreline; flooded the island with fog; and made use of a huge, all-important tree (Roy communes with the birds).

The play runs a bit longer than it should, primarily because of the intervals when characters give way to self-examination. Still, there's infinite comic potential whenever one of the characters (usually Gordon) turns a hungry eye toward the hidden mysteries of

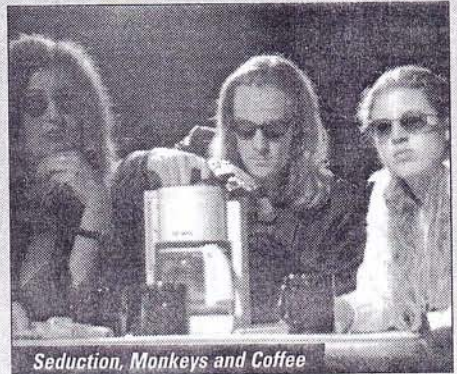
Angus's rucksack. Angus is prepared for Armageddon, but he lacks the basic common sense that's needed to replace a battery. Ditto his island mates, which is why we don't mind being stranded on Neville's Island in their midst. (Evan Henson) *Old Globe Theatre, Balboa Park, San Diego, (619) 239-2255. Tues.-Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 2 & 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m. Through June 28. \$23-\$39.*

### SEDUCTION, MONKEYS AND COFFEE

Theater in the round poses a challenge not only for those involved in a production but also for audience members. Throughout most of the Hunger Artists' *Seduction, Monkeys and Coffee: A Night of Contemporary Plays*, I felt uneasy, pressed up in a corner of the one row of seats against the tiny theater's wall. While the actors didn't seem to mind the intimate surroundings, I couldn't shake the self-conscious feeling of being onstage, too. The three plays succeeded in only slightly assuaging this discomfort.

Chimpanzees forced to type until they write *Hamlet* boisterously commence the evening with David Ives' *Word, Words, Words*. Director Eric Hamme wisely decided to keep the tempo quick, but punch lines are often missed because the actors don't allow enough time for comedic pauses. As Swift and Milton, Alex Laverde and Jeff Soll make gruff chimps. Jamie Sweet seems uncertain of his role and gender as Kafka—a role usually reserved for a female—as he tumbles around in a short dress.

Hunger Artists member Adam Martin contributes—writing- and directing-wise—to the seemingly endless number of Quentin Tarantino rip-offs in *Hairtriggers*. While it's amusing for a spell, blood-



Seduction, Monkeys and Coffee

soaked, gun-toting convicts praising the virtues of damn good coffee and cigarettes should last only so long. The play would at least be a short, sweet tribute had Martin cut the running time in half and stayed with just the first two characters, Stoke and Dixie (adeptly played by Kelly Flynn and Dru Obade).

Dragging the evening to a close is company member and writer/director Kelly Flynn's *Ismene*. Based on the Theban Cycle (which follows the ill-fated Oedipus and his family), the play unrealistically demands familiarity with material that most of us haven't encountered since high school-freshman English class. Setting the play in the 20th century also doesn't add much depth, particularly with such feeble lines as "Oh, my gods." (Anna Barr) *Hunger Artists Theater, 204 E. 4th St., Santa Ana, (714) 547-9100. Thurs.-Sat., 8:30 p.m.; Sun., 7:30 p.m. Through June 21. \$10-\$12.*