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Show Guide

BIG TABLE , THE, LA Feb 23-Mar 18

Reviewed by Kristina Mannion

If offbeat and somewhat lowbrow sketch comedy, à la Saturday Night Live, is your idea of entertainment, then Adam Martin's *The Big Table* just might be the show for you. And in this case, we're not talking just slightly offbeat. Martin's zany concoction can safely be categorized as a decidedly bizarre farce—a loosely tied-together collection of bits that alternately baffle and amuse the audience as they lampoon everything from *Godzilla* movies to James Bond to the conventions of theatre itself. It can't be denied that a show that includes characters like Pterodactyl Boy and Gayboy Pixie is unquestionably eccentric and original.

Presented by and at the Hunger Artists Theatre Company, 204 E. 4th St., Suite I, Santa Ana. Fri.-Sat. 8:30 p.m., Sun. 7:30 p.m. Feb. 23-Mar. 18. \$10-12. (714) 547-9100.

Of course, just like SNL, *Table* is a mixed bag of hit-and-miss sketches. Some scenes go on too long, some gags are repeated too many times, and some jokes just don't work at all. Yet, despite these noticeable flaws, Martin's crazily off-the-wall script does boast a few sidesplitting moments. And thanks to director Melissa Petro and her unabashed cast, those few gems receive a hilarious staging in this Hunger Artists Theatre Company production. Exhibiting dauntless enthusiasm and unflagging energy, these players tackle *The Big Table* with tangibly infectious zeal. It's their evident delight in playing Martin's wacky characters and acting out his absurd scenes that ultimately keeps this production afloat.

Built upon a rather flimsy premise, *Table* is supposedly based on the imaginings of a playwright with dubious talent—a hack who is struggling to prove to the devil that he can write a scene with genuine compassion. Instead of demonstrating substance, however, the writer comes up with one inane scene after another. And these are scenes almost too difficult to describe here; surely, any in-depth description wouldn't adequately capture the play's wit. Suffice it to say that Martin has an exceptionally weird, albeit entertaining, sense of humor—one that offers some clever satire, as well as shamelessly off-color jokes and preposterous physical humor. In the hands of the Hunger Artists the play's hodgepodge of vignettes is an amusing, often ludicrous diversion.

Playing several roles apiece, each performer in this five-member ensemble turns in his share of funny lines and memorable gags. But the true comedians in this staging are Alex Dorman and Mark Palkoner. Offering up a ridiculous parody of Dr. No (of Bond flick fame), as well as other goofy characters, Dorman hilariously proves that it's possible to get away with hammy caricatures. Palkoner, on the other hand, perfects the art of deadpan delivery and subtle humor. Serving primarily as the play's sad-sack main character—a nerdy guy who is none too smooth with the ladies—Palkoner is comically charismatic and consistently laugh-out-loud funny. When Palkoner is onstage, Martin's script comes alive, and there is no fear of a joke going on too long.

Hunger Artists dish up silliness

STAGE

REVIEW: The original 'Big Table' takes a comical view toward the clichés of movies, TV and life itself.

By ERIC MARCHESE
The Orange County Register

Everyone knows what the big table is — it's where the grown-ups eat dinner. Every kid who's ever eaten at the kids' table wants to eat at "the big table." Most of the characters in Adam Martin's goofy, funny "The Big Table" are just overgrown kids who want to eat with the grownups. Especially longing for this privilege is a character known as "The Writer," a playwright who has frittered away his talent and now, facing judgment day, has a perverse desire to be admitted to hell.

Of course, everything in "The Big Table" is perverse, including Martin's definition of the big table; it's "where the biggest sinners sit for all eternity."

Martin, a member of the Hunger Artists Theater Company, sees the unveiling of his play in a world premiere production at H.A.'s cozy second-floor venue on Fourth Street in downtown Santa Ana. It's a zany collection of movie and television spoofs that begin as separate story lines — actually, more like skits from "Saturday Night Live" — and then, gradually, intersect. Most of "The Big Table" is just plain silly, but it's a welcome silliness. Though the individual scenes may not tickle your funny bone, you may laugh unrelievedly at so many isolated moments in the show that the net result is gratifying. And most of the scenes are so brief that you barely have time to react to them before they're over.

"The Big Table" opens with a prologue in which the Devil (Alex Dorman) warns the Writer (Norman Major III) to silence himself as the play begins. The first three story lines involve Dick (Mark Palkoner), who's hopelessly in love with Jane (Jami McCoy); two bespectacled men in lab coats (Palkoner and Dorman) who are awaiting the arrival of Godzilla; and the futile attempts of Dr. No. (Dorman) to assassinate agent 007.

Each of these skits is funny in and of itself, worthy of perhaps a five- to 10-minute sketch



SILLY: The Admiral (Norman Major, left) inspects two sailors (Alex Dorman, Mark Palkoner) as 'gayboy pixie' (Fatima) does her thing.

on a series such as "SNL." After the opening sketches, new characters and scenarios are introduced, including a perpetually drunk expert on theater (Dorman) and a fast-food chicken outlet with an obscene name, a lax manager (Palkoner), and a screeching cashier known as pterodactyl boy (Major), who jabs the customers with his beak.

As "The Big Table" progresses, Martin begins to have fun with our perceptions. Once a new character has appeared, he or she can pop up in any other scenario. Each of director Melissa Petro's performers (the four mentioned and a fifth, the singularly named Fatima) essay multiple roles, following Martin's wacky premises through to their logical conclusions. "The Big Table" is so good-naturedly off the wall that a character can shift, mid-scene, from one to another. Example: Palkoner manages the chicken store, but when McCoy appears as Jane, he morphs into the lovesick Dick and goes running after her.

Each member of this cast does a yeoman's job handling multiple roles. McCoy is essentially the show's straight man — er, straight woman — and though she's a sexy nurse with deadly bad habits and plays a couple of other roles, she's usu-

'The Big Table'

- ▶ **What:** Hunger Artists stage the world premiere off-the-wall comedy by troupe member Adam Martin
- ▶ **Where:** 204 E. Fourth Street, Suite 1, Santa Ana
- ▶ **Continues:** Through March 18, 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, 7:30 p.m. (also Monday March 12 at 8:30 p.m.)
- ▶ **How much:** \$12
- ▶ **Length:** One hour, 25 minutes
- ▶ **Suitability:** Not suitable for children (profanity)
- ▶ **Call:** (714) 547-9100

ally that workaday gal, Jane. (She and Palkoner do have a particularly funny bit where they snort drugs before the audience, ending each fix with a high-wire-style flourish, all to the theme music from "SWAT.") Fatima handles several small supporting roles well. While Major essays eight roles, none outside of pterodactyl boy is especially funny, but he plays every part reliably, whether portraying James Bond or a WWII admiral.

Palkoner and Dorman are this troupe's adept comedians, and they are well showcased here. Palkoner gets laughs with Dick, who's so wimpy and romantically mushy he lip-synchs to love songs on the

radio and phones Jane every five minutes to record a singsong "I love you" on her voice mail.

Palkoner is more overtly comic when, in tandem with Dorman, he awaits Godzilla's coming. The pair effect high-pitched, sci-fi monotonous and, with their tight white coats and Coke-bottle specs, they're like Smart-and-Smarter. The skit, revisited throughout "The Big Table," has a rewarding — and very theatrical — payoff (an inspired design by Petro) which any further description would ruin.

Dorman creates the show's most distinctive comic personas. Even his more prosaic characters — a pompous businessman with a new cell phone and a studly sailor who's never without a dumbbell, doing arm curls — are fraught with humor.

Even more gratifying are his Dr. No., theater expert and devil. Stroking a cat (stuffed animal), Dr. No. hisses his cultured voice ("You disappoint me..." is his oft-repeated catchphrase) that nicely captures the megalomania of every Bond villain. Staggering around in a raincoat, the "theater expert" is, in addition to being perpetually drunk, British and obnoxious (especially when he's hitting on Jane).

Dorman's devil, wearing a set of goofy teeth and bellowing with a Southern twang, is so outlandish that Dorman cracks himself up, losing his teeth (at least on opening night). In fact, Dorman suppresses his own laughter in scene after scene, which adds to the production's level of hilarity. Will he lose it onstage? Even if he doesn't, just watching him try to keep a straight face puts us right in the offbeat spirit of Martin's whacked-out creation.

Most of the skits are well-written, but there are dead spots where actors don't react quickly enough, killing the show's bang-bang pacing. In some spots the profanity is funny, but it's mostly excessive. By the second scene after the intermission, Martin begins to repeat characters and material, and "The Big Table" begins to run out of steam. This show could easily be cut to just over an hour and performed without intermission. The momentum of the first half is dispersed by the break and essentially lost by the second act. Martin's material is good, but it clearly doesn't warrant a two-act staging.

▶ Contact Marchese at (714) 796-6904 or at emarchese@notes.free-dom.com

The Orange County Register

Friday, March 2, 2001

SHOW

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KAMIKAZE COMEDY

Crotch-sniffing under
The Big Table

BY CHRIS ZIEGLER

The Big Table is a play that asks the big questions: "What are you guys on?", "Where can I get some?" and, of course, "What the fuck is happening up there?"

Plot, coherence and taste are all left for dead in this wild-eyed, slash-and-burn comedy rampage that lurches from smart satire to goofy parody to completely cracked, post-modern, stream-of-consciousness absurdity and more. When it's good, it's damn good. When it's not, you'll be too shell-shocked to notice.

Maybe Hunger Artists director Melissa Petro and writer Adam Martin had dads like mine. Unable to repress his essential immaturity after a day at some real job, my dad would burst in the door sporting Groucho Marx glasses, a fat roll of *Mad* magazines and a rented copy of *Kentucky Fried Movie*.

The Big Table (an original play by Martin) deals in that same sort of classically tasteless and over-the-top humor, the kind of stuff that flourished in the 1970s before sitcoms killed it

off, before America got too jaded to think a good crotch-sniffing gag was funny.



Table isn't sophisticated by any means—though Martin can pen a fat-guy-shitting-out-a-candy-bar bit that works on more levels than Thomas Pynchon—but it's a refreshing romp through delightfully unpretentious and snotty sketch comedy.

Don't look for anything too deep—you'll hurt yourself. Instead, watch for a devil; a sailor; a pterodactyl boy; James Bond; a "gayboy pixie"; Dr. No; a sadistic nurse; a lovelorn fat guy; a drunken, self-reflexive theater expert; a scissors-wielding woman wearing little but a cardboard box reading "You're first at Ralphs"; a very special mattress; and, obviously, much, much more.

The cast (Norman Major III, Fatima, Mark Palkoner, a revved-up Alex Dorman and a perfectly wicked Jami McCoy) is completely willing to sacrifice itself and its dignity for the cause: a play that thrives on kamikaze comedy. The predictable gags are a bit of a drag—whatever life was left in spoofing spy movies was bled out by Mike Myers—but there's enough momentum that the strong stuff (an inspired riff on Beckett with "Waiting for Godzilla," for instance) ably drowns out the weak. Things work best when they're completely insane, and in this play, things are almost always that way.

THE BIG TABLE AT HUNGER ARTISTS THEATRE, 204 E. FOURTH ST., STE. I, SANTA ANA, (714) 547-9100. FRI.-SAT., 8:30 P.M.; SUN., 7:30 P.M. THROUGH MARCH 18. \$12; \$10 WITH RESERVATION.