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Courageous 'Reindeer'

By BYRON WOODS, Correspondent

CHAPEL HILL - It's fitting that Open Door Theater's traveling production of "The Eight: Reindeer Monologues" unfolds in a couple of bars. If you don't have a good stiff drink before you see it, you're probably going to need one when it's over.

Why? All those long, Arctic nights may have finally turned St. Nick into "a holly jolly sex crime waiting to happen," in the words of one of the eight reindeer who have carted him the world over. At the play's outset, another has gone public with accusations of on-the-job sexual harassment, and lawyers and the media have descended upon the scene. In Jeff Goode's deeply funny and deeply disturbing play, the absolutely, positively lowest of the North Pole lowdown gradually comes out in individual interviews with each member of the famous sleigh-bell set.

In this courageous, commendable production, the satire of the enterprise is telegraphed from the beginning of Benjamin Beecher's initial deposition as Dasher -- an "alpha reindeer" if ever there was one. But the devastating sucker punch of this ultimately pitch-black comedy sneaks up on you. It comes from the playwright simply letting the premise play out, in its entirety.

As extended testimony unfolds, what begins as a relatively lightweight Santa-centric sex farce evolves into a far more sober examination of the realities of sexual harassment and high-placed corruption. But this 1994 work, written clearly in response to the Sen. Bob Packwood affair and the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas proceedings, arguably goes even further.

Before it's done, "The Eight: Reindeer Monologues" implicates the audience in a working examination of the ethical underpinnings of sexual humor. The jokes fly fast and furious in the play's first section, but let the buyer beware: In the whole of the work, there's not a single cheap laugh to be found. We have to reconsider on several occasions what we've been laughing at up to then. Then comes the inconvenient question: Why were we laughing?

Jeri Lynn Schulke's direction is crisp, and on the opening afternoon of the run at West End Wine Bar, a strong cast seemed to just be settling in. Goode's script veers into the realm of satirical stereotype, but Schulke and company resist more than once the reductive temptation to follow suit.

We learn that Denis Riva's gay Cupid flames at least in part because, under the strange circumstances at 90 degrees North, it's the safest thing to do. Laura Christopherson's robust rendition of Blitzen brings dimension to a polemical feminist role that so easily could have been merely played for laughs. Rick Lonon haunts as a guilty father in the role of Donner, while Laura Blake's reading of a timid (and perhaps already brutalized) Dancer invokes laughter before cutting it short, with authority. Katja Hill's performance as the accuser who is herself accused is complex, unrepentant and ultimately no laughing matter. That's not a criticism in this case; it's an endorsement.

REVIEW

What "The Eight: Reindeer Monologues." When and WHERE Today-Saturday, 9 p.m., Skylight Exchange, 4051/2 W. Rosemary St., Chapel Hill. Dec. 15-16, 9 p.m., Artists Escape, Bank of America Building, 137 E. Franklin St., Chapel Hill. Cost \$5 donation. Call 933-4650.

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The sexually frank subject matter of "The Eight: Reindeer Monologues" make this one decidedly off limits to the younger set. But its holiday-tinged take on sex, power and ethics provides compelling food for thought for the rest of us.

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