

LOS ANGELES SMALL THEATER NEWS

JOHNSON OVER JORDAN lies at the other end of the spectrum from FAIR MAID. It is J.B. Priestley's story of a man, recently dead, looking back on his life through a thin, shimmering, shifting mirror that distorts in the first act and then settles down in the second to give him clarity and release. The dramaturg's notes for this production by the Unknown Theatre Company confesses that Priestley's fable got lost in the shuffle of cataclysmic world wars, Thornton Wilder, and Frank Capra. The influence here is less WASP and more Buddhist, specifically the Tibetan Book of the Dead. The recently departed Robert Johnson (Christopher Capiello) spends the first act working with and through the life he did not lead, especially the debauches he never experienced. The action, supported by a large ensemble, hangs an eerie but lovely frame around the man's turmoil - the corners he cut, the deals he made, the people he neglected. Director Chris Covics also created the deceptively sparse set. Design elements pop in and out with surprising ease. This is no mean feat given that NORAD-style doors and descending bar tables are all part of the mix. The act begins and ends with a tableau in which Johnson lies on his bier surrounded by family and coworkers. It starts in black and white and ends in frightening color.

If the first act presages a company that means business, the second act seals it. The turmoil damps down and Johnson takes a long, loving look at the things that did go right for him. He meets his childhood heroes, his grown son and daughter, a beloved teacher. Nathan Bouldin stands out as the latter in a delightful exchange of quotations from the books of Johnson's youth. The audience is now hooked despite itself and the rejoining of Johnson with Jill, his wife of thirty years, is poignant despite its inevitability and decades of precedents. Vanessa Waters is a perfect Donna Reed, waltzing through shared memories good and bad before gliding off. The production is ironically reminiscent of the Archibald Macleish's JB (a retelling of the Book of Job) offered by Buffalo Nights at The Powerhouse a couple of years ago.

This is Unknown Theater's debut performance and the company has served notice that it is a force. There are several economic models around which theatremakers nucleate ranging from devil-may-care to meticulously planned. Furious came to Los Angeles with a roadmap and followed it to great success. Prior to opening the doors of Unknown, Chris Covics spent a few years building a board, raising funds, building an ensemble, and a long-range plan. He also seems to have anticipated the real estate crunch and purchased a space on Seward Street just off of Santa Monica Boulevard's Theatre Row, providing a buffer against the whims of landlords. It is a converted warehouse with a bar in the lobby and a wide, deep configurable performance area. The theatre will also play host to performance and fine art. The name, however, is a conceit. The founders must know full well that they will be known in short order.