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THEATER

Review: Summer Shorts at 59E59, With 'Love Letters' and a Couch Potato

Summer Shorts 2015: Series B | Off Broadway, Fair/Festival, Play | 59E59 Theaters, 59 E. 59th St.
| 212-753-5959

By **ALEXIS SOLOSKI** AUG. 2, 2015

Stella (Colby Minifie), a young Southerner adrift in upstate New York, adopts an unusual pen pal. She worries he won't write back as he'll be occupied with "ordering people around, or eating lobster on silver plates or getting a massage, that kind of thing." But Kim Jong-il responds. He even sends an autographed photo.

Stella Fawn Ragsdale's whimsical solo one-act, "Love Letters to a Dictator," concludes the second series of this year's Summer Shorts festival at 59E59 Theaters. Ms. Ragsdale's heroine, who shares her name and her background, is so unmoored in her life that she turns to a tyrant in the hope that she "might steal strength from you and learn a ferocity."

Logan Vaughn's direction is overactive and the character's faux-naïf posture and formal diction are sometimes exasperating. But the tonal mix of the letters — confiding, needling, probing, sympathizing — reveals a distinct and compelling voice (though probably not one that would have been appreciated by Mr. Kim, North Korea's supreme leader until his death in 2011).

A visit from him might have productively shaken up Lucy Thurber's lackluster "Unstuck," about a demoralized man (Alfredo Narciso) who spends his birthday moldering at home. A tap routine and an a cappella song, both intentionally awful, don't encourage him to leave the comforts of his sofa.

But no one is sitting comfortably in Robert O'Hara's seamy, steamy "Built," about a sexual encounter between a middle-aged professional woman (Merritt Janson) and a younger male hustler (Justin Bernegger). Or at least that's how it first appears. It would be unsporting to reveal much more about the plot or the characters.

Mr. O'Hara, who had a hit last year with "Booty Candy," keeps shifting perspective so that our comfortable moral judgments get tangled and jangled. Neat and nasty, this is a treacherously erotic piece of writing. It takes a precise and perverse vision to find so much sensual potential in a football, a backpack, a multiple choice exam.

"Summer Shorts Series B" continues through Aug. 29 at 59E59, Manhattan; 212-279-4200, 59e59.org.

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