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Theater Beat

Mixing Some Bitterness With the Holidays' Super-Sweetness

While "Hate for the Holidays" at Silver Lake's Moving Arts isn't nearly as mean-spirited as the name suggests, it still lives up to its ongoing mission as a biannual "antidote show" for holiday sappiness. Yet even amid its most acerbic satire, this trio of Christmas-themed playlets finds human warmth in unexpected places.

Trey Nichols' opening monologue, "Fluffer," recounts the increasingly frantic Christmas Eve of a customer service rep in a cheesy department store. Drawing from a frighteningly believable retail reservoir of occupational hazards, his character's tribulations include disposing of soiled diapers, defusing an indignant customer's outrage, baby-sitting lost children (non-English-speaking, of course), contending with small-time gifters, managing the line of the store Santa photo op and supervising a group of developmentally disabled kids brought in to help make bows for the gift-wrapping department.

This last ordeal cuts close to home, for making bows is the one activity that transcends his mundane existence. With the dexterity of a pro, Nichols demonstrates the fine points of fluffing while exporing his conflicted feelings--frustrated at the kids who can't get the hang of it but moved by their simple desire to help.

Looking every inch the squeaky clean, mild-mannered placater, Nichols squirms hilariously amid the mercenary agenda of the store's policies--a razor sharp portrait in a piece as well-written as it is performed.

In David Vegh's equally sharp "Grandma's Christmas Goulash," a family gathering proves a surreal experience for Steven (Gary Marschall) and his new girlfriend (Kimm Rachelle Covault). In a quick succession of blackout sketches, they endure the quirks of his bickering, thickly accented grandparents (Rachel Brindamour, Richard Ruyle) from the Old Country (each convinced he or she is the targe of the other's murderous intent), his alcoholic mother (Charlyn Huss) and his philandering brother (Brad Henson), who tries to interest Steven in some hooker hanky-panky. Trying to maintain a semblance of normality and honor, the couple gradually capitulate to self-interest.

In the final monologue, Julie Briggs recalls anecdotes that have made her holidays anything but "The Most Wonderful Time of the Year." Yuletide disappointments include a childhood caroling tour of a nursing home, an ill-fated volunteer effort to feed the homeless at a rescue mission and a tacky New Year's Eve in Death Valley. Maintaining a sense of humor through it all is Briggs' ultimately hopeful affirmation. Precise, well-paced delivery carries this closer, though it lacks some of the focus and direction of the preceding pieces--an earlier slot in the lineup would have worked better.

Lee Wochner's staging proves adroit at rendering humor as well as poignancy in all three pieces.

--PHILIP BRANDES