

Three Angsty Men

Moses parts the Flea with new collection of shorts

By Nick Rizzo

LOVE/STORIES (or *But You Will Get Used To It*), currently in previews at the Flea Theater, is surprisingly cohesive, considering that it consists of five different short plays written by the up-and-coming playwright Itamar Moses over the course of several years.

The production is bound together not just by the subject matter (love and the aftermath of relationships) but also by the sense that each play is about the playwright himself. It begins, after all, with a recording of Moses' voice asking for the silencing of cell phones and making other assorted witticisms, and then moves into a play about the fears of playwright casting a play based on his love life.

Moses' plays weren't always so personal. His first major production in New York was *Bach at Leipzig*, a Baroque-period farce. Just a few months ago, the Manhattan Theater Club presented his *Back, Back, Back*, a play about steroids in baseball. Both of these subjects have little to do with Moses' personal life, in contrast to his other major play to be performed in New York, *The Four of Us*, which detailed the complicated friendship between a struggling young playwright and a young novelist who becomes successful very quickly. That play attracted quite a bit of attention because it was obviously based on Moses' friend-

ship with literary wunderkind Jonathan Safran Foer, and because it dealt intimately and honestly with failure and envy among friends.

Love/Stories is similarly intimate, though for more than just thematic reasons. It's directed by Michelle Tattenbaum, a longtime collaborator of Moses', and is intensely performed by young members of the Bats, the Flea Theater's resident acting company. The intimacy is heightened by the unusual performance space, which has 40 seats in only two rows, right up against and level with the wide, shallow stage.

Moses is skilled at capturing how people actually speak, especially when those people are angsty young men. His characters have lines like, "Actually, actually, actually" or "I...!" This naturalness of speech contrasts with the experimental nature of the plays, each one of which is less traditional than its predecessor. Moses' has long been interested in narrative structure: *Bach at Leipzig* is based on the idea that a fugue and a farce have the same structure, while *The Four of Us* repeatedly jumps around in time and has the two main characters commenting on the play from within it.

With *Love/Stories*, Moses was particularly influenced by David Foster Wallace's story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. "I loved the way his stories had different



Maren Langdon and Michael Milcalizzi in *Love/Stories*.

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main ciphers. Moses admits this is an area of his writing that he's still developing. "I think it was clearer to me faster how to write men from the inside-out rather than outside-in," he explains. "For women, this process took a little longer, wasn't as organic."

Love/Stories provided an opportunity for Moses to write about women. The plays are short, so characters require less development, and they're about relationships and love, about which men are apt to spend more time worrying about a woman's perspective than they would in other subjects.

Of his three major plays staged in New York, there have been 12 male parts and no female parts. This will change. His new play, *Yellowjackets*, which he is currently reworking, has roughly equal numbers of male and female characters.

Still, *Love/Stories* is a courageous undertaking; most works this experimental and self-revelatory are one-person shows. Here, Moses is relying on the cast to show the audience quite a bit about himself. Nevertheless, the playwright will always be somewhat obscure. As Moses said about his play *Authorial Intent*, perhaps the strongest of the production, "Even if you try to expose yourself—uncloak, uncloak, uncloak—there's always still an element behind the curtain."

> Love Stories

Through Mar. 9, The Flea, 41 White St. (betw. Church St. & Broadway), 212-352-3101, times vary, \$20.

ways of playing games with form," Moses tells me, "but the game was never arbitrary, it was essential to the story." Each play's narrative experiment reflects a different element of a relationship; each conceit underscores the difficulty of truly understanding someone else. This plays out in eavesdropping, in having characters actually speak their dramatic objectives, in translating for each other and, finally, in a scene that is not allowed to begin because the narrator won't let it.

Like his male characters, Moses sometimes seems to struggle with understanding women. Several of the female characters re-

