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D2 ENTERTAINMENT

THEATER REVIEW

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'HIR' is 'absurd realism' at its best

By JEFFREY BORAK
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LENOX — It's not the homecoming Isaac — called I by his mother — expected.

After three years at war collecting body parts as a member of the Marine Mortuary Affairs Unit, Isaac returns to his family house in which disarray is an understatement. Clothes are strewn all over. There is barely a place to sit, let alone stand and maneuver.

"Some people get parades and banners and I come home to this!" says Isaac, played by Adam Huff with a profound sense of deep anguish, pain, loss, anger and thwarted hope in Shakespeare & Company's blistering production of Taylor Mac's "HIR."

"You wanted a banner?" Isaac's mother, Paige (an absolutely on-fire Elizabeth Aspenlieder), replies in innocent sincerity.

"Yes," he responds. "Three years away from home in a war zone, I want to have a banner and cookies and a clean home and a father who isn't dressed up like some tranny clown."

He's confronted by a plywood-and-nails house that is barely holding up under the Central California heat, sustained only by an air conditioner that is kept on by Paige as one more way of getting under the skin of her husband, Arnold (John Hadden, in a revealing portrayal) who has suffered permanent and deteriorating mental damage from a stroke.

It turns out that Isaac has left one battlefield for another. He craves order, neatness, compassion and justice. His father is clothed in a clown's wig, crudely made up. He wears a loose-fitting dress over Pampers. He is made to drink a brew of vitamins Paige concocts in a blender, the sound of which causes Isaac to vomit. And, Isaac learns, his sister has transitioned into a brother named Max (played with style and depth by Jack Doyle).

After years of abuse — physical, mental, financial — Paige has declared her independence and taken charge of the household, posing as someone more savvy and knowledgeable than she, in fact, is; organizing events, like the weekly Saturday cultural day on which she and Max — and now, she insists, Isaac — travel three hours by car to take advantage of urban cultural opportunities while leaving Arnold behind to fend for himself.

The house is a den of conflicting needs and identities; a setting in which personal pronouns take on new sound and vocabulary — "ze" for he or she; "hir" (sounds like "here") for him or her. It's a whole new alphabet; a whole new world for Isaac, who knows nothing but order, regulation and cleanliness. So, it



From left: Adam Huff, John Hadden, Elizabeth Aspenlieder and Jack Doyle in Taylor Mac's "HIR" at Shakespeare & Company's Elayne P. Bernstein Theatre through Oct.

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their trip, Isaac sets out to clean house. It's what he's done throughout his military career — cleaned up the human waste of war.

He puts his father in real clothes. He launders and neatly folds the casually discarded clothing that claimed every space in the living room. The big cardboard box in which his father sleeps is being used for storage. Isaac sets the table and makes a real dinner. Clearly, he is on a collision course with mom.

Paige, who is something of a poseur, will brook no opposition. As played by Aspenlieder, she is a force of nature who will suck love out of both of her sons. Max has other plans in mind, plans that don't include his mother. Max is about finding ways to reconnect with his brother on his own terms and shake loose from his mother. Max lives in a new world order, exemplified by a community several hours away that he intends to join; a community of like-minded souls.

Director Alice Reagan's galvanic production never lets up for a moment, driven, in no small measure, by Aspenlieder, sending her to the ramparts ... and beyond. Among the genius turns in this production are the ways in which our sympathies, if not allegiances, shift in the conflict over Arnold. As played by Aspenlieder and Hadden, neither is likable, except at certain

future might truly hold for her.

Huff is stunning as Isaac, a young man who is pulled in competing directions all at once as he fights without and within to find solid ground.

to be home in both a literal and figurative sense.

In a performance notable for its remarkable and subtle attention to detail, Hadden is compelling as a man who, we have reason

to suspect, might not be as isolated from what is happening around him. He is still capable of responding to Paige's commands with loathing, hatred, violence and contempt.

In his introduction to the "HIR" script, Mac describes the play's genre as "absurd realism," which he defines as placing "simple realistic characters in a circumstance that is so extremely real it is

absurd." His writing is incisive, witty, pointed, at times bordering on a polemic. His humor, particularly in this dazzling whirlwind of production, plays out in ways that are as chilling as they are exuberant.

Laughter and pain at once. What, I wonder, is new word for that?

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Running time: 2 hours, 11 minutes

Tickets: \$25-\$65

Reservations/Information: 413-637-3353; shakespeare.org

understandable. The cruelty, the animosity between Paige and Arnold is, at best, acidic, but it's not without reason. Isaac knows only what he sees, which is treatment of his father that goes beyond human decency.

What sacrificial son Isaac doesn't know is the abuse and cruelty Paige claims to have endured. Now, with Arnold incapacitated, Paige unleashes the righteous anger, bitterness and hurt she has held in for so long. She has gone down a road from which there is no turning back. Just how far is made evident in a decision she makes about Isaac even if, at the same time, there is