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## THEATER REVIEW

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## THEATER REVIEW; The Epilogue of a Chat Room Flirtation

By ANITA GATES

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Not every cyberspace romance ends like Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan's in "You've Got Mail," with the golden couple embracing in an urban flower garden while the dog frolics at their feet. Chopin6 and Sorry12, for instance, meet in a computer chat room and decide to try an in-person date early on.

Their story, "Heartbreak of the Last Handwriting," is the first of four new one-act plays that make up "Thicker Than Water," the Ensemble Studio Theater's collaboration with Youngblood, its company of very young theater artists. It's an absolutely terrific production, with talent bursting out all over. And if there's a single theme on the young playwrights' minds, it's the difficulty of making couplehood work.

Chopin and Sorry, who seem particularly young themselves, give it their all. After one of their dates goes badly, Sorry, a k a Melanie (Amy Love), apologizes online. "I'm sorry I acted like road kill," she says. No, it was his fault, says Chopin, a k a Joel (Jason O'Leary), asking if she remembers the outer space, other-dimension, whatever-it-was place Jodie Foster found herself in near the end of the film "Contact." He was "two exits past that," he says.

The charm of Jeremy Soule's play, brightly directed by Tomi Tsunoda, is in the thrilled giddiness of the two characters as they realize the relationship is turning into something: wonder of wonders, someone they like actually likes them back. Toward the end the two explore more complicated feelings. Both actors are charming, and it's a nice decision to have the computers represented by tin cans and string.

The second play, Amy Fox's "Heights," is about people well

beyond giddiness. The encounter begins as a battle of wills between two stubborn New Yorkers (the kind who'd shove aside their own grandmothers to get a taxi in rush hour) but turns out to be much more. At 2 a.m., Alec (Andersen Gabrych) goes to the roof of his building to set up a romantic Chinese food picnic for two with his beloved, who will be arriving shortly.

Unfortunately, he finds another building resident, Isabel (Sally Wheeler), there already, stretched out on a chaise longue, suffering from insomnia for the third night in a row. She has left the apartment so she won't disturb her fiance.

Although Alec offers Isabel money to leave, she refuses. And when a third person, Jonathan (Peter Rini), joins them, one of the two is very unpleasantly surprised, and the battle grows infinitely more complicated. At times "Heights" is hilarious, seeming to comment on how much more sophisticated we are than we used to be about sexual orientation as a factor in romantic competition. Or are we? ("Truth will out," Alec says to Jonathan at one point, leaning hard on the word "out.")

At other times the confrontation has echoes of the facing-your-true-self scenes in "The Boys in the Band." In the end, Ms. Fox seems to say, being lied to is the greatest offense, and misrepresenting sexual orientation to someone you're having a relationship with is a pretty major lie. The director is Jimmy Bohr, who directed Alan Bowne's "Beirut" in 1987.

In Crystal Skillman's "Tooth," two people who seem to have nothing in common go out for a drink. She's a wide-eyed bank teller (Francie Swift, looking like Alice in Wonderland); he's a writer (Frank Whaley, the production's token established actor) who considers dating an opportunity to stroke his own ego in front of an appreciative audience.

Mr. Whaley, whose roles have ranged from Kevin Spacey's punching bag of an assistant in the film "Swimming With Sharks" to a character described as Willy Loman's younger self on Benzedrine in Circle Rep's "Size of the World," is outstanding, making every word and gesture count. But Ms. Swift holds her own, as her character does, once the writer lets her get a word in edgewise. After she tells her story, which begins with the extraction of wisdom teeth and moves into oral incest, Mr. Whaley's character is the one who's impressed.

The final play is a total mystery. S. Vasanti Saxena's "Baby Blue" seems like a parody of Tennessee Williams, with a quartet of Southern-accented characters saying things like "Your face is a blessing," "I got a dead daughter" and, best of all, "You fed him your sadness, spoonful by spoonful." But it seems this beachfront encounter -- among a muscular but childlike young man, a seductive older woman who turns out to be his mother, the mother's jealous boyfriend, a mystery woman who emerges from the sea and a box full of money -- is meant to be taken at face value.

Maybe other audience members understood all the talk about ghosts, a big cat and why it's dangerous to go into the house.

Three out of four's not bad.

## THICKER THAN WATER

Four one-act plays. Sets by Mike Allen; lighting by Shawn Gallagher; costumes by Kimberly Matela; sound by Dean Gray; production stage manager, Jim Ring. Presented by the Ensemble Studio Theater, Curt Dempster, artistic director; M. Edgar Rosenblum, executive director; Jamie Richards, executive producer; Youngblood, Chris Smith, artistic director; Abigail Zealey Bess, producer. At 549 West 52nd Street, Clinton. Through Sunday.

HEARTBREAK OF THE LAST HANDWRITING, By Jeremy Soule; directed by Tomi Tsunoda; stage manager and assistant director, Maria T. Pagano.

WITH Jason O'Leary (Chopin6) and Amy Love (Sorry12).

HEIGHTS, by Amy Fox; directed by Jimmy Bohr; stage manager and assistant director, Allison Astor-Vargas.

WITH: Andersen Gabrych (Alec), Sally Wheeler (Isabel) and Peter Rini (Jonathan).

TOOTH, by Crystal Skillman; directed by Abigail Zealey Bess; stage manager and assistant director, Nathan Cox.

WITH: Frank Whaley (Man) and Francie Swift (Woman).

BABY BLUE, by S. Vasanti Saxena; directed by Rebecca VerNooy; stage manager and assistant director, Sonda Staley.

WITH: Michael Ryan Segal (Rock), Anne Newhall (Wanda), Marc Romeo (Jarvis) and Amy Staats (Kira).

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