

THE DIFFICULTY OF BATTLING THE BOMB

ROBERT KOEHLER

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microfilm.

seems almost new. At Theatre of Arts, it also seems like the early draft of an eventually strong play.

Bernstein, we're told (to our partial disbelief), was the former middleweight world champion; now he's dying of an unmentioned disease in a trashed corner of Skid Row. There are those who wish to help him—Chico (Hector Ayala) and Slicker (Gilbert Hill)—and those who don't—Murphy (Rick Ivey) and, later, Whitey (Jon Morgan). It's the hopelessly confused, infantile Andy (Mack Owen) who's in the middle, which is surely why he's the most interesting character by stretches. Will he go with the good, or will Murphy's animalism and anti-Semitism (Andy has had it in for Jews since childhood) sway him?

Shaffron pads his reasonable plot with unreasonably verbose and smarmy monologues that halt the pace and ideas. But, for all the padding, the melodrama machinery is exposed once too often, and we're left with a highly forced tragedy rather than an organic one.

What's refreshing here is an authentic working-class perspective on the human struggle, and a cast, particularly Owen, with a sure grip on their distinctly

drawn characters. Director Dick Ciciotti has helped with the character angle, but the pacing problem remains unsolved. No problems, however, are to be had with Pat Patterson's good, grimy set, but Owen's lights are ridiculously bright.

Performances at 4128 Wilshire Blvd., Fridays and Saturdays, 8 p.m., Sundays, 7 p.m. Ends Oct. 30 (851-3771).

'VIBES' AT CAST-AT-THE-CIRCLE

Another baseless courtroom drama that we don't need. Another psychobabbling piece of agit-prop that we don't need. Another the-insane-are-sometimes-saner-than-the-sane statement that we don't need.

What we don't need is "Vibes."

This is one of the more obvious rental productions—at Cast-at-the Circle—in some time. It's a fourth-rate tenant in a first-rate building. Everything, from the script to the cast to the scene changes, is certainly even—evenly wretched. Wise's utterly improbable tale follows a nice, slightly psychic girl (Shawn Schepps)

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From left, Mack Owen, Rick Ivey, Hector Ayala, Jon Morgan in "The Passing of Michael Bernstein."

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By ROBERT KOEHLER

Something occurred to me the other day: What could be a more effective way of protesting the arms race than by refusing to pay the portion of one's tax bill that funds the American side of that race? It's been suggested before. But how odd to see your errant notion, still fresh in the head, given life in a play, namely Bradley Smith's "The Man Who Stopped Paying" at Theatre of Note.

For a while, at least, this kind of selective tax resistance seems to be Smith's argument. His man who isn't paying is big, burly, bearded and working-class pure. He isn't a collegiate, but he's well-read (he compares the great "play" of today—nuclear arms protest—to the great plays of the past—"Lear," "Antigone," "The Oresteia"). The bomb terrifies him so that it infests his dreams and dictates his politics.

His hate is equal to his fear, though, and its object is the government. Bureaucrats are the enemy, for, while they maintain the welfare system, they also maintain the machines that will destroy that welfare. Smith's hero simply pays no tax at all—he doesn't even send in the form. For the first time in a long time on a stage, an anarchist libertarian has sounded out.

Perhaps it's right, then, that he's alone in his garage workplace speaking to us. Even though he's married, and speaks of that love as tenderly as he does of nature, he's his own man in every sense. Jon Ackelson plays him with a little abandon but a great deal of heart.

Yet one yearns for a rough-hewn Shavian dialogue here that would lift the polemic into a play. Something of a natural adversary would sharpen our hero's wits as well as our own. We end up arguing with him silently (wipe out the nukes, yes, but at the expense of the elderly and poor?), and that is not enough. A director other than Smith might have worked in a contradictory touch, the tension that is drama's oxygen.

You leave with another set of errant notions. What if thousands of people stopped paying? Is this the way to halt arms? With his love of nature and disgust of bombs and feds, Smith could become a kind of playwright laureate of an American Greens Party. But, then, he'd probably rather go it alone.

Performances at 301 Boyd St., Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 8 p.m. Ends Oct. 28 (680-9844).

'PASSING OF MICHAEL BERNSTEIN'

A. Buddy Shaffron, former beachcomber, merchant

marine and barkeep, may have written "The Passing of Michael Bernstein" seven years ago, but it's of a much earlier era when the social drama was the *sine qua non*, when O'Neill and Sinclair were the kingpins. Perhaps because this kind of writing has been away for so long, it

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from home to her eventually comatose state in a mental ward. How she got there and what happens could do nicely in a contemporary volume of apocrypha. Edmund J. Cambridge allows his actors a panorama of embarrassing indulgences, most unforgettably Leslie Larkin's *hysterical reporter*.

Performances at 804 N. El Centro Ave., Thursdays through Saturdays, 8 p.m., Sundays, 3 and 7 p.m. Ends Oct. 30 (462-0265).

'HEARTSHIFT' AT TOBA WEST

We'd like a story set in a middle-class black

household with its subject of the casual terrorism men practice with women to work, if only because the combination is rare and rich with potential. J.J. Hodges' production of his own "Heartshift," at Toba West Theatre, not only doesn't work, it's simply unworkable.

What to do with a husband (Calvin Chamberlain) who pauses two seconds between nearly every line and who endlessly discourses to his niece (Fannieta Belae) on the merits of a suburban doll house, his new "creation" for his toy firm? What to do with a woman (Civille Ross) who stares at her typewriter saying to herself, "I have to finish this book so I can be free"?

What to do with Belae's niece, who has plenty of chances to avoid the awful throes of incest she finds herself in?

A deadly combination makes this one of the most painful shows of the year to sit through: Hodges' incredibly stilted prose, an amateur's inability to get the exposition and characters from point A to point B, and an uncomfortable trio of actors who appear to be no better than a week into rehearsal and reciting a newly memorized text.

Performances at 1406 N. Lake Ave., Pasadena, Fridays and Saturdays, 8 p.m., Sundays, 3 p.m. Ends Oct. 16 (798-2180).

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