

Tasty Food and Comedy Tidbits Combine in 'Prayer for the Gun Bug'

by Mark Bretz, Ladue News

Story: Three short plays by Carter Lewis take an amusing look at modern-day foibles against the flavorful backdrop of Meskerem Ethiopian Restaurant. In the first vignette, *No Preying*, bellicose Heddie is busy browbeating Christian Agatha with her aggressive brand of atheism, ranting that God is no more likely to exist than giant insects.

Lo and behold, what to their wondering eyes should appear but a huge praying mantis, who settles down at a nearby table before inserting himself into their conversation. What's worse, he won't comply with the 'No Praying' sign inside the establishment, much to Heddie's consternation.

In *A Geometric Digression of the Species*, husband and wife Alex and Evelyn enjoy some rare private time and tasty delicacies at Meskerem. While noshing, Alex intones about the world's rampant population explosion even as they debate which of their 11 children is best suited to watch the others in their absence.

Art Control shows us what can happen in a gun-toting society when Frank and Donna sit down for dinner and Donna grows impatient with an erratic waiter. As she becomes increasingly frustrated with his indifference to serving her table, she reacts like a gunslinger in an Old West saloon. Trouble is, everyone else is armed to the teeth as well.

Highlights: OnSite Theatre, which specializes in site-specific presentations, has delighted audiences in the past with plays written for such venues as a bowling alley, a Laundromat, a hostel and an art gallery. In this case the locale is Meskerem's Ethiopian Restaurant in south St. Louis, which serves a delicious ethnic cuisine as well as being theater of the moment for OnSite Theatre.

Lewis, playwright-in-residence at Washington University, has written world premieres for The Rep and other theaters as well as contributed to two previous OnSite endeavors. His latest effort serves as an amusing and entertaining complement to the Ethiopian dining specialties served by the amiable Henok and Atsete and the staff at Meskerem.

Other Info: *Prayer for the Gun Bug* is much less confusing than its head-scratching title, which seems to be an amalgam for the skits that serve as sandwich ends for this quick (90 minutes, with two intermissions) and clever comedy.

Under Bill Whitaker's easy-going direction, an intrepid cast consisting of Gary Wayne Barker, Peggy Billo, Paul Edwards, Jacqueline Thompson and Pete Winfrey has a great deal of fun bringing Lewis' amusing characters to life. Not to be overlooked is costume designer Robert Van Dillen's inspired contribution for Winfrey's praying mantis concoction, which includes large, protruding antennae, ominous bulging eyes and menacing storm trooper boots direct from *The Rocky Horror Show*.

The first two vignettes are better than the finale, which suffers from dragging on too long. The latter, though, does have an amusing twist that breaks the fourth wall with abandon, when Billo as an irate audience member commandeers the stage to force the playwright to write something she will appreciate rather than any confusing claptrap.

No Preying is theater of the absurd with a sharp, humorous edge, featuring Billo as the overly assertive Heddie, Thompson as the quieter, more serene Agatha and Winfrey as the cavalier insect who simply follows Darwin's 'survival of the fittest' dictum with nary a care in the world.

Billo and Barker make a telling pair in *Geometric Digression*, which actually has some moments of pathos as the down-trodden Evelyn is pushed aside by her self-aggrandizing husband when a waiter (Edwards) informs them that there no longer are any parking spots at that restaurant, or probably in the world. Barker is suitably smug and Edwards is cocky and comic as the flippant waiter, with Winfrey and Thompson in smaller parts.

Lewis seems to lose control, ironically, of *Art Control* when a cop played by Edwards reveals that he doesn't have a gun and would rather talk down the other characters in their escalating skirmish. This wears thin until Billo saves the story with her brusque entrance.

Mostly, though, *Prayer for the Gun Bag* is filled with mirth, merriment and madcap moments that go very nicely

with Ethiopian appetizers and your favorite craft beer.