

The author certainly

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Joe Penhall's "Dumb Show", created to demonstrate the sleazy underbelly of the world of television and its cousin, tabloid journalism, is certainly a professionally written play. It is fast, witty, and with just the right amount of sarcasm. The author certainly knows what he is talking about - the story of two journalists, Liz and Greg, going undercover to reveal the secret life of a TV comic named Barry is totally believable, as is Barry's reaction to this event.

It is even set in a very particular and very correct setting, as the hotel room seems to have a life of its own, making the viewers feel the impersonality of the situation. The actors work well, creating the atmosphere of a real verbal duel. However, the play leaves one with a strange feeling of incompleteness, of both not understanding what the play is about and understanding too well, making it a memorable play in a bad sense of the word. It is difficult to say why this effect is obtained. Perhaps it is because the author clearly shows that he sympathizes with none of the characters.

They are demonstrated, indeed, from an insider's point of view, and an evil-meaning insider's at that: suitably sleazy, with that peculiar professional sense of black, almost sadistic humor that only people of the profession understand. Even good intentions are depicted in such a way that they seem false and egoistic. When the journalists talk of information being free, it is so obvious that they speak of this noble concept only for getting their money's worth, that any person that values this virtue to some extent is forced to cringe from the falsehood of it all.

When the comic speaks of the right to privacy, we hear of the right to remain silent at arrest. It is the dirt of lives, dug up and shown to the public: gray,
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vile, and incredibly banal. Such things, for some reason, are always seen as incredibly realistic, no matter how well they are executed. I do not see the reason for this. Plays that work with the lows of life are necessary and, naturally, realistic. However, life isn't a zebra, divided into black and white.

It is more like a peacock with too many colors, demonstrating different things, but all too proud of itself. There is never such a thing as a real black color in life, nor a real gray. Everything has its silver lining, and this play, showing only the lows - for, even the last scene where Liz tries to redeem Barry is not pretty - is not nearly positive. Such single-mindedness, while admirable, does not make for the realism that the author was trying to create. It is actually the actors that liven up the show somewhat.

The stereotypical jokes put into their mouths come to life because of their talent. Their reactions to one another are shifting, living. The little points of their acting - such as Dippold's ambiguous reactions to the duo of men, or Barry's acting in the jokes he is given - imply much deeper characters, which are so much the styrofoam stereotypes. They were meant to be that way: the situations are supposed to play out on the archetypal level, reaching within. However, the archetypes chosen are too shallow for that.

They are things everyone can relate to on a merely superficial level, just enough to sympathize a bit - which is not nearly enough for a play. Thus, to make the point, the characters should have been created alive by the author, with somewhat more character. They should have been anchor points for personal interest in the play - even if mere tools in the conflict between professions, they should have been good tools. Instead, we see

mostly the interaction of the stereotypes of the respective professions, much like trying to saw with a cardboard saw.

The actors save the day here, livening up the characters and giving them more depth than Penhall seemed to intend. The play is a good example of a professional skit, yet nothing more. It is made all too clear what the point is supposed to be - the conflict of freedom and privacy - however, it is not deep enough, nor controversial enough for such a topic. The author attempted to work at the golden middle, and failed - professionally, thus, non-abysmally, but he didn't make it anything great, either.

It is a story about archetypes, not an archetypical story. Nor is it a personal story, showing how people get affected by this sort of conflict. It attempts to be both, but is neither, and thus leaves the viewer puzzled as to where the true point is. One wants to look for hidden meaning, for the simplicity is unbearable, but there is nowhere to look for hidden meaning. To create a piece with only one meaning and have it still be a work of art is the work of a genius. Penhall is not one.