

Solo shows use simplicity to be complex

In one way they're the toughest test in theatre (and the cast parties are a bit sparse, too). But the Fringe loves one-actor shows, and vice versa.

The theatrical challenge of telling a story and populating a world single-handedly is a delicate proposition. It can occasion the most baroque premises to explain why someone might find himself on a stage spilling his guts to a crowd of strangers — madness, the Internet, the phone, the religious confessional, or the shared assumption that the crowd of strangers doesn't exist. There are a couple of striking examples at the Fringe of a simpler, riskier way of being one actor in a theatre full of people. Both, in their way, have magic to them, and end up using simplicity to be complex.

With *My Morocco* ★★★★★½ (Stage 2, Telephone Museum), Calgary playwright Ken Cameron takes the stage as ... himself. He looks us in the eye and talks like Ken Cameron (i.e. fast, with wry, breezy good humour). He tells us about the other Camerons; he acknowledges being what he is, a playwright. He teaches us to greet people in Arabic, "Peace be with you."

That's one of the things Cameron eventually learned, and even came to understand, on his fateful holiday in Morocco. But before he learned that, he learned something else: his sister, with whom he's had a falling-out of two years' standing, has suddenly died, in Canada. And there's no way for him to get home in time for the funeral.



Liz Nicholls



Along with the shock comes the horrifying reflex, in his playwright's brain, that, hey, this would make an awfully good play. And, yes, we are witnesses, and hence complicit: it did.

My Morocco is all about the weird byways of grief, love, and anger, more intricate than the Casbah. It's about the morally equivocal way artists co-op life. It's about the comic indignities of being Canuck in an exotic world. Cameron, the playwright who worries about being one, is a likable, self-deprecating figure onstage. He weaves the strands artfully, with a light touch, and faces us with honesty. And his story will move you.

In *The White Guy* ★★★★★ (Stage 10, Yardbird Suite), by Calgary-based writer Stephen Hunt, we meet a man (Mark Jenkins) with an incurable cultural problem. Being a white male, and hence a member of a privileged majority — "the tribe to whom nothing happens" — means that you lack moral authority, for obvious historical reasons. Who invented the patriarchy? says the white guy ruefully. Who invented apartheid? The list goes on.

Actually, listing is something that Hunt's funny, insightful script does with panache. There are white achievements: being the first man on the moon, writ-

ing *Death of a Salesman*, stealing rock'n'roll. And Jenkins negotiates a blend of the off-hand and the manic that is consistently convincing. He conveys the sense of a man thinking up his defences and offences, adding throw-aways on the spot, learning things, improvising his life. And, since *The White Guy* is more a clever, witty piece of writing than it is a play — evident particularly during a slightly writer-ly bit about "my lost lesbian years" — this is an achievement.

After that, the contours of the white guy get more sculptural. He lives in New York. He has an Afro-American girlfriend at the time of the O.J. trial, and the verdict creates relationship tension. She is guilty, he says, "about being so non-threatening to whites." In his East Village digs — "psychos, drug addicts, unpublished poets" — he has a roommate who gets stabbed, and changes his cultural views, for the worse. Life is racially charged in ways undreamed of by white guys from The 'Peg.

In the end, there is a dramatic shape to *The White Guy*: it has a classic romantic resolution, in the form of marriage and a baby. But the fun of getting there is the sharp, self-deprecating insights of Hunt's writing, captured so winningly by Jenkins. Family life, normally given to "critiquing the bourgeois side of the family, the ones who have jobs," is more complicated when it crosses the racial divide.

In its elliptical, episodic way, the show addresses, in personal terms, what it means to be white, and Canuck, in a racially complex world. And the white guy onstage is there to tell us how his age of innocence came to a close.

nicholls@thejournal.canwest.com

Ken Cameron plays himself in *My Morocco*.

SEAN DENNIE, PHOTO GANDA