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## 'Animal Games' realistic but not all that interesting Playwright Yockey's script doesn't seem to be saying much.

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If you haven't been following the work of Atlanta playwright Steve Yockey, that's your loss.

If you have, you'll already know that his plays tend to be slight, but just in the sense that they're over and done with in a brief 70 or 80 minutes. This was as it should be in the case of Yockey's inspired "Cartoon" (produced by Out of Hand in 2006), a dark satire about violence conceived in the style and spirit of a Saturday morning TV show, where a shorter attention span somehow went with the territory.

At other times, however, Yockey leaves you wanting more. When things were really getting good in "Skin" (at Dad's Garage in 2007), his provocative and intricately layered drama about sexual relationships, the ending felt abrupt and incomplete. You wish the play had been longer and gone further -- mainly because it was so compelling, if not only to explain what all those periodic splashes of lights and sounds were supposed to mean.

Yockey's prone to veering off into weird dimensions like that, a quality you either appreciate or you don't. "Octopus" (Actor's Express, 2008) dealt with infidelity and AIDS, raising more legitimate questions than it could answer in a mystical parallel universe of ominous sea creatures. "Bellwether" (given a staged reading earlier this year at the Express) began with a gripping premise about a missing child and her accused parents, and ended in a netherworld of maniacal mechanical dolls and such.

All of which brings us to Yockey's latest, "Large Animal Games," a co-production of Dad's Garage and Impact Theatre (in California).

To call it his most realistic play to date is intended as a compliment, but that isn't to suggest it's as deep as his earlier work. It's slight in the usual Yockey way -- an extended one-act with no intermission -- but also in the unusual sense that he doesn't seem to be saying anything of much interest or import.

"Games" loosely overlaps and connects several situational subplots: an image-conscious bride-to-be (Whittney Millsap) discovers a potentially scandalous secret about her otherwise wholesome fiance (Clint Sowell); a woman (Erin Burnett), back from Spain with a hunky new boyfriend (Louis Gregory), catches him in bed with her best friend (Alison Hastings); and her roommate (Shannon Byrd), a black woman on safari in Africa, has a spiritual experience she never imagined.

That the action alternates between those three places -- plus the lingerie shop where the characters occasionally intersect -- is no small task, given the confines of Dad's Top Shelf space.

Director **Melissa Foulger** sets the scene(s) with a wonderful flourish, cuing some dance music while her cast dresses the stage with furniture and props, and she keeps the rest of the play moving at the same brisk pace.

The winning actor Joe Sykes is a Yockey regular. Here, his "swishy" lingerie clerk functions sort of like the omnipresent Stage Manager in "Our Town." In frequent asides to the audience, he observes and comments on the play as it unfolds around him, when he isn't personally interacting in it.

Perched at the back of the set, some of his gestures and facial expressions accentuate the comedy -- and yet it's not the best sign, when, during a particularly serious monologue by another character, he's thumbing through a magazine, as though he couldn't care less.

Theater review

"Large Animal Games"

Grade: B-

Through Nov. 29. 8 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays. 8 p.m. Sundays (Nov. 22 and Nov. 29 only). 8 p.m. Mondays. \$13-\$18. Dad's Garage, 280 Elizabeth St. 404-523-3141, dadsgarage.com.

Bottom line: Local playwright Steve Yockey's most naturalistic work to date, and his least distinctive.

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