

City Lights

From the November 18, 2005 issue.

Low Level Panic

By Trey Graham

TO NOV. 29

Representations are what Clare McIntyre's questioning in this claustrophobic one-act, and representations are precisely what director Suzanne Richard confronts her audiences with: Walk into the tiny performance space at the back of 1409 Playbill Cafe, and suddenly you're in the shared bathroom at Jo and Mary and Celia's apartment, a space whose walls are papered—the window, too—with ludicrously glamorous magazine goddesses, idealized creatures created to give ordinary women something to live (and shop) up to. Look closer, and every 10th image turns out to be glossy hardcore; six degrees of sexualization, set designer Klyph Stanford seems to be saying, doesn't begin to describe the ways our society sells and sells to its women. That merchandising—along with the psychological pressures it creates—opens some doors and closes others for McIntyre's women: Jo pursues sexual and material fantasies as avidly as any Penthouse-thumbing male, even as she chronicles the imperfections of face and figure she assumes will put such things beyond her reach. Mary, having lived the worst consequences of objectification, has developed a pathological aversion to making herself feel pretty, whereas that's pretty much all Celia can make time to think of—and away they go, talking in great circles about eye shadow and porn, shoes and self-consciousness, making a certain scathing sense of the interconnections. Still other doors are opened, and others yet are closed, by the Open Circle Theatre's production: Selene Faer, an actress with a neuromuscular condition called spinal muscular atrophy, plays Jo, whose ravenous fantasizing insists that audiences confront whatever assumptions they've made—or avoided making—about the ways a woman with a physical disability might respond to the throb of hormones. Even the physical unwieldiness of Jo's motorized wheelchair in the confined space of that bathroom, an inescapable reality that sometimes slows the production's pace and saps some of its urgency, raises issues of intimacy and awkwardness and adds layers to the play. McIntyre's '80s-vintage show sometimes feels a bit like the women's-studies treatise Richard insists, in her director's note, that it's not. Still, it's a smartly conceived production, from Stanford's set to the wryly apt songs Ian Armstrong has picked to score it with, and it sticks in memory for the risks it takes—and in a week that's seen bigger, richer companies conspicuously avoiding them, that's worth celebrating all by itself. Performances are at 8 p.m. Fridays, Saturdays, Mondays, and Tuesdays, with shows at 2 p.m. on Sundays, through Tuesday, Nov. 29, at 1409 Playbill Cafe, 1409 14th St. NW. \$15. (202) 265-3055. (Trey Graham)