

by TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER

F**KING STRANGERS

Echo Theater Company

There is an undeniably electrifying magic that happens when a brilliant and courageous playwright, a veteran director gifted with uncanny surgical precision, and a seamless ensemble of actors align. Echo's stunning world premiere of Erik Patterson's *F**king Strangers* delivers just that: a penetrating and deeply contemporary exploration into the intertwined nature of connection, deception, and our species' universal craving to be seen and loved.

Patterson, whose formidable body of work (*Handjob*, *One of the Nice Ones*) has long established him as one of Los Angeles' most vital theatrical voices, has penned a piece that's as hilarious as it is piercing and often uncomfortable. Under the spot-on clockwork leadership of director Chris Fields, founder and artistic director of the Echo, the production navigates a breakneck series of quick cinematic scene transitions with such fluid grace that the rhythm never falters, a rare feat in plays structured with such rapid shifts that the momentum often gets lost in the dark.

At the heart of the production is what easily stands as one of the most cohesive ensemble casts of the year. Echo audiences will immediately recognize three of the four actors from the theatre's memorable production of Samuel D. Hunter's *Clarkston*, also directed by Fields two seasons back, a presentation that garnered my annual TicketHolder Awards for Best Production, Best Actor in a Play for Michael Sturgis, Best Supporting Actress for Tasha Ames, and my New Discovery 2024 Award for then LA theatre newcomer Sean Luc Rogers.

These remarkable performers' well-honed artistic shorthand with one another is quite palpable here, perhaps making it a tad intimidating for *Strangers*' additional castmember James Tupper—or then again, perhaps not. I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall during rehearsals to see the process unfold.

Rogers captures the volatile, seeking energy of Patterson's *Teorema*-esque pivotal role, a smoldering and successful callboy with a soul and a troubled past, mining a unique sincerity when delivering lines with an effortless magnetic charisma—including a quite endearing self-assessment for Dylan's choice of profession: "I'm a sexual kaleidoscope... I like to help people."

Sturgis turns in a staggering performance, finding a delicate though intensely complicated vulnerability as the agoraphobic Ru—and he appears to lay it bare with an incredible and, I'm sure, deceptive ease. What's most remarkable is how subtly he masks his character's true motives for seeking out and befriending Dylan online in the first place. It's a secret kept hidden from the audience in real time but in retrospect every layer, every choice, every flicker of intent is right there on display all along and Sturgis delivers a masterclass in quiet calculation and emotional complexity.

Ames once again proves her remarkable range, bringing depth, a worldclass comic timing, and a grounded humanity to every moment she inhabits, while Tupper offers an initially world-weary presence as a conflicted father with a complicated secret extracurricular sex life who becomes caught in the center of the play's heightening storm. The lessons Mick learns along the way about how to calm his guilt and trust his feelings unfortunately eventually proves to be a condition that, in the last analysis, proves devastating.

At its core, *F**king Strangers* grapples with the quiet desperation of modern life and our attempt to be brave enough to tackle the desire to step out from behind our carefully curated facades and simply be recognized. As Patterson reminds us, "Fiction is the lie that tells the truth," and this sensational wordsmith uses his fiction to hold up a strikingly accurate mirror to humanity's collective loneliness.

If there is any reservation in an otherwise flawless evening of theatre at its most riveting, it lies in the play's final moments. Without spoiling the narrative turns, Mick makes a decision at the climax that personally to me felt unsatisfactory and painfully misguided. I yearned to see the character break free toward happiness and building a fresh chapter with someone truly worthy of him, stepping away from the self-centered figures in his life who should be making the effort to find themselves rather than demanding that sacrifice from him.

Perhaps that lingering ache is a testament to how deeply we come to care for these characters over the course of 90 minutes. Here's hoping Patterson might consider in the future writing a *F**king Strangers: Part Two*, if only to give Mick a second chance and the bighearted Dylan the resolution he deserves.

THROUGH AUG. 24: Echo Theater Company, Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Av., LA. (747) 350-8066 or EchoTheaterCompany.com