

EVERYBODY'S GOT ONE

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CURRENT THEATRE REVIEWS by TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER

HANDJOB



Photo by Darrett Sanders

Echo Theater Company at the Atwater Village Theatre

I have been around the block so many times in my life that I've made grooves in the pavement.

I was butt-naked and promoting "Suck-Ins for Jesus" in *Hair* for an extended period of time in the late 60s, the very first time full-frontal nudity was attempted on a stage anywhere—which usually meant vice cops were around to line the back of the theatre wherever we opened waiting for a signal to take us all away.

In 2000-2001, I was nude again onstage, this time in my early fifties and covered in Joe Orton's blood each night playing Kenneth Halliwell in Lanie Robertson's *Nasty Little Secrets*. It proved to be a performance which won me a shelf-ful of impressive awards, but I've always suspected that was because I was brave enough to expose my massive girth in my sunset-ing years for all to see more than it was meant to honor my performance.

Then there was that less-than mainstream movie my then-partner Victor that I made for our friend Nicholas Grippo in 1971 or so. It was called *Cheaters* and, if anyone has or ever finds a copy of it, please share it with me because gawd knows we ain't a gonna ever look like *that* again.

The point here is, I purdy much consider myself artistically shockproof. Yet, about halfway through Echo's world premiere of Erik Patterson's *Handjob*, just as everyone else in the Atwater Village Theatre audience, my jaw must have fallen to just about *there*.

At that point in the play, the title proves playable in a most boldly graphic way but what could be seen in most other situations as gratuitous, here it is absolutely the opposite. Shocking the heck outta us is exactly what the outrageous Mr. Patterson wants to accomplish. As the playwright's onstage counterpart Keith (Steven Culp) admits soon after that little transaction goes south and the characters discuss its impact, "I need to make people uncomfortable. People need to leave this theatre and have this very conversation."

Mission accomplished.

In the first scene of *Handjob*, Keith has hired a strapping young housecleaner named Eddie (Michael Rishawn in an auspicious LA debut) to make his apartment spic and span. Oddly enough, however, although Keith apologizes profusely for being such a dysfunctional mess, on Amanda Knehans' brick-walled Manhattan apartment set there are some books stacked around on the floor and a few random newspapers out of place, but there's not much cleaning to be done, which forces Eddie (or any actor playing him) to busy himself moving things around from place to place and dusting in front of the framed *RENT* and *Legally Blonde* playbills on the bookcase instead of getting down and dirty (no pun intended).

Whether this is an intentional device because Keith has ulterior motives to get his money's worth or if it's an annoying oversight director Chris Fields has ignored is unclear, but Eddie's lack of things to do appears to be more of a distraction for someone as anal retentive as I am than it is a theatrical choice. And if anyone cleaning my apartment ever cavalierly decided to throw away saved newspapers and stacks of envelopes without asking if they needed to be saved, he'd be out the door with or without his shirt.

See, the reason Keith hired this guy to clean is because he advertised as someone who cleans in the buff. I would guess this is the case since that is what's usually offered in such cases, although in this production Rishawn never strips off anything except his shirt—which again feels like a bit of a copout, especially considering the *handy-dandy* climactic (no pun intended again) sex act that becomes the pivotal moment in the play.

There are a few missteps such as this in this world premiere that really, really need tweaking next time it's mounted (pun intended this time), but my druthers are minor because its assault to our complacent senses is absolutely brilliant, opening up a discourse about why any artist needs to shy away from controversy as it continuously barrages those gathered with uproariously funny dialogue and awkward situations. *Handjob* is, perhaps, my favorite of Patterson's many works I have repeatedly praised throughout the years.

Patterson's plays are traditionally full of unexpected turns and this one is a prime example of that.

Soon after Keith makes the mistake of ignoring the straight Eddie's rule that he can look all he wants but not touch, Kevin misinterprets a sideway smile as a signal and grabs his junk as he bends over

the sink. Before the first scene goes to blackout after Eddie has gone all #metoo on his host, the second scene opens with two other actors in the same apartment saying and doing almost exactly the same things as the first two did before them.

The only difference is that this time Bradley (Ryan Nealy) is more than willing to put out for an extra \$40, stripping down to a ridiculously overstuffed jockstrap as he tells his host Kevin (Stephen Guarino) he's only been good at two things in his life: cleaning and fucking.

This leads to the aforementioned action suggested in the provocative title and, beyond that moment in the storyline, I would be doing this fascinatingly twisted play a disservice by revealing (another pun?) anything more at this point. Let me just let Patterson's alter-ego Keith speak for me as he defends the pivotal act: "If you put it onstage, if you light it, then that's not violating anyone." Again, whether or not there's truth in that statement is up to what you decide after the show over drinks at Momed or on your drive home from Atwater Village.

Aside from the lack of authentic activities for the two housecleaners to perform before each gets to put his own tool to use, Fields' production is quite impressive and his game ensemble is gratefully willing to go wherever Patterson's insightful situations and delightfully sick mind takes them. This includes castmembers Tamarra Graham and Gloria Ines, whose characters' identities and the reason they suddenly show up onstage offer another mystery I'll leave at that.

I might suggest that perhaps a smaller prosthetic prop and more fiddling around before said prop "appears" might make the critical scene between Guarino and Nealy more believable, but both handle it (oh, the puns) smoothly and Guarino's dryly hilarious take on his complacent predator who "felt safe enough to explore the moment" is a standout.

In his LA stage debut, Rishawn is especially charismatic yet incredibly comfortable donning the conflicted skin of Eddie, whose presence opens a whole other can of worms as he accuses Keith of purposefully casting a character based on him in a play as caucasian, suspecting he didn't want the "blackness of me to overpower the gayness of you." If ol' Terpsichore is in the house, Rishawn's performance here could mark the beginning of an impressive and well-deserved career in our hardhearted Industry town.

Now, a final thought: I think next time someone shows an interest in producing *Handjob*, the ever-tendentious Erik Patterson might consider renaming his newest play *Blowjob* and take the stakes one step higher. This would be something I think could make it even more controversial, which is an admirable goal, if you ask me—and besides, I think it would be a far more realistic goal for Keith in his duplicitous quest to get his already clean apartment cleaned.

I mean, once his hired help rearranges a few books and throws away those newspapers without asking if they're being saved for a reason, I think the guy needs to have *something* to do, don't you?

THROUGH Oct. 21: Echo Theater Company, Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Av., LA. 310.307.3753 or EchoTheaterCompany.com