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REVIEW

Award-winning new play provokes thought, laughter

BY WERNER TRIESCHMANN ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

There are laughs in *Bertrand Priest*, the winner of the Kaufman and Hart Prize for New American Comedy by New York playwright Ian Cohen that's having its world-premiere production at the Arkansas Repertory Theatre. But the laughs are more of a casual byproduct - and not the objective - of Cohen's compelling existential examination of creativity and spirituality of four characters in New York City.

Audiences that walk into *Bertrand Priest* shouldn't expect a rip-roaring farce and should be OK with the idea of a live boa constrictor slithering in and out of a cage on stage. That snake is the beloved pet of Katrina Chernov (Josie DiVincenzo), a woman who has taken on a young writer (Mark Fisher) as a lover and as a project in need of her spiritual guidance. She gives him the name of *Bertrand Priest* and tells him that he needs to find his "purpose with a capital P." She also has wild dreams where *Priest* is murdered in various ways.

The other pair in the play, struggling actor Dennis Kennedy (Eric Martin Brown) and Al Steinberg (Matt Walker), his gruff-talking friend, seems, at first, to have no connection to the lovers cavorting in a bed on center stage. But Kennedy, who sees God in the way the subway caters to his wishes, needs \$5,000 dollars so he can be in a play written by, yes, *Bertrand Priest*.

Steinberg's no-nonsense character, played with enormous zest by Walker, is expertly drawn, especially in his last scene where he speaks about how money "makes everything real." As the hopeful actor, Brown, at first, is too mannered but then he recovers and reveals the pitiful desperation underneath. DiVincenzo invests her quirky priestess with heart and soul.

Bertrand Priest is, at times, too much in love with its own mysticism. The elaborate dream sequence in the middle of the play feels like too much work for yet one more death of the title character.

But the play is tightly constructed and compact, running about an hour and half with no intermission. You can tell the actors and the Rep design team (set designer Mike Nichols, lighting designer Matthew Webb, costume designer Olivia Koach and sound designer M. Jason Pruzin) have great fun tackling this adult material (and it is, it should be noted, adult material).

Bertrand Priest continues through May 13 at the Arkansas Repertory Theatre. Information is available at (501) 378-0405 or (866) 684-3737.

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