

FOR THE WEEK OF APRIL 26 -- MAY 2, 2001


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NORTH COUNTY TIMES

## THEATER

### REVIEW

## Palomar's gritty 'subUrbia' rewards with fine direction, casting

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Staff Writer

It's not always easy watching "subUrbia."

The play's collection of losers ---- who spend their days (and nights) getting high, having sex and spewing foul language, graphic sexual innuendo and racist rage in a 7-Eleven parking lot ---- weren't created by playwright Eric Bogosian to give you the warm-fuzzies.

But under director Michael A. Mufson's unflinching hand, the Palomar College production of "subUrbia" sucks you in and ultimately fascinates. A superb young corps of actors, led by the talented Ian McAlpine, and an excellent set design by Stephanie Parker bring gritty and naturalistic reality to this uncomfortable story of suburban emptiness.

Make no mistake. "Oklahoma!" this ain't. Many theatergoers will be offended by the play's R-rated depiction of surly, self-absorbed and seriously dysfunctional 20somethings. The characters have few redeeming qualities, and they do nothing in the course of the play to win you over. Yet while you may not like these characters by play's end, you might understand them just a bit more.

In "subUrbia," we meet Jeff, Buff, Tim, Sooze and Bee-Bee, ex-high school classmates whose only satisfaction is their nightly hang-out session ---- drinking beer, skateboarding, listening to music and generally goofing off ---- at the corner convenience store. Their horseplay seems innocent enough until they consume enough beer and marijuana to loosen their inhibitions and bare their souls.

### "subUrbia"

**When: 8 p.m.  
Friday, April 27 and  
Saturday, April 28;  
2 p.m. Sunday, April  
29**

**Where: Howard  
Brubeck Theatre,  
Palomar College,  
1140 W. Mission  
Road, San Marcos**

**Tickets: \$10,  
general; \$8, seniors;  
\$6, students (not  
recommended for  
children)**

**Info: (760) 744-1150,  
Ext. 2453**

Jeff and Sooze dream of breaking out, but the rest are content with their monotonous middle-class lives, filled with TV, fast food, masturbation and mind-numbing drugs. Only when Pony, a former classmate who has made it big as a rock star, stops by the 7-Eleven for a visit do they recognize the wasteland that their lives have become.

Mufson does a fine job setting up the characters and slowly building the tension to its surprising climax in the second act. He's also selected a terrific, age-appropriate cast to bring the tense story to life.

It's impossible to take your eyes or attention off Ian McAlpine, who is 100 percent believable as the seething, sarcastic and occasionally hilarious Tim, an alcoholic racist who lives on disability since intentionally slicing off his fingertip in a kitchen "accident" to get discharged from the Air Force.

Tiffany Rose Brown matches him toe to toe in her honest, angry portrayal of Sooze, an aspiring performance artist who has decided to leave her boyfriend, Jeff, behind and move to New York, where she can present her sexually provocative (and comically awful) poems, such as "Burger Manifesto, Part II" --- an anti-male diatribe featuring unprintable words and a large foam penis.

Lance Rogers does a nice job capturing the confused inertia of Jeff, a community college student who is so torn between wanting to save the world and doing nothing (because the world is unsalvageable) that he is paralyzed by fear.

And Peter Benelli provides welcomed comic relief as Buff, a David Arquette-style skateboarding simpleton who equates eternal happiness with an endless supply of beer, junk food, television, sex and home videos (sample quote: "I'm alienated, too, but at least there's Oreos").

Tori Johnson is meek and sensitive as the fragile Bee-Bee, an oddball nurse's aide who's struggling to stay sober after a stint in rehab. And Anthony D. Moreno does a fine job singing and playing guitar as Pony, the seemingly bisexual rocker who finds himself apologizing for his success to the 7-Eleven set. Providing strong backup is Tracy Bremseth as Pony's sexually adventurous publicist, Erica.

Anthony G. Rosa does very well with the tough job of Norman, the Pakistani owner of the 7-Eleven (which inexplicably closes overnight). Norman's earnest, hardworking character and his nervous sister, Pakeeza ---- played well by Niloo Khodadadeh ---- represent American society and its disapproving view of the parking lot pack.

Norman (and society) can't see that Sooze's male-bashing poetry comes from the fact that her father deserted the family when she was a child or that her palpable anger relates to the tragic drowning death of her retarded brother. They can't see past Bee-Bee's pink hair to know how kindly she treats AIDS and Alzheimer's patients at the nursing home. And they mistake Jeff's fear of failure for laziness.

Parker's 7-Eleven set design ---- complete with Dumpster, phone booth, and other realistic elements ---- heightens the play's realism, with an able assist from lighting designer Pat Larmer and costumer Erik Hill. The cast created the sound design, which includes the buzz of nighttime insects and vroom of passing cars, and Jeremiah Williams created the show's original guitar music.

Unlike many plays, "subUrbia" doesn't moralize, and you won't leave with a smile on your face. Like Bogosian's own street-corner youth that inspired it, "subUrbia" is an honest, warts-and-all depiction of disillusioned suburban life. It's not pretty but it's real, and Mufson and crew have done a fine job capturing it in all its facets.

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