

VARIETY

Lone Star

BY JULIO MARTINEZ

James McLure's 1978 tragicomic glimpse into the vociferous but stunted lives of two backwater Texas good ol' boys is rousingly staged by Beverly Hills-based Camelot Artists Prods. as the kickoff production of its inaugural subscription season. Helmer Allen Williams doesn't try to instill any insights into this basically uneventful legiter, wisely allowing his excellent three-member ensemble simply to wallow in McLure's infectious wordplay. Abetting the proceedings is Victoria Profitt's perfectly trashy outdoor-behind-the-bar setting.

Set in the early '70s, McLure's latenight, beer-fueled pas de deux between embittered Vietnam vet Roy (Don Swayze) and his easygoing, mentally challenged younger brother Ray (Michael Patted) does not offer the social insights of "Waiting for Godot." It does, however, resemble the Samuel Beckett classic in portraying two incomplete souls who must keep talking to one another to prove they're still alive. The inner workings of these two denizens of Maynard, Texas, are better realized when "Lone Star" is paired with McLure's companion one-act, "Laundry and Bourbon," which focuses on the women in their lives.

The action is driven by Roy, who has ritualistically set up the trash-strewn area behind Angel's Bar as an oasis of solitude, complete with a case of Lone Star beer on ice, an array of junk food and the flags of Texas and the U.S. adorning the discarded car seat that serves as his couch. A former star college athlete, Roy vainly attempts to capture tangible connections to all he has lost, most significantly his fervor for life.

Roy's attempts to rise above his plight are constantly shattered by debilitating headaches and the callow presence of kid brother Ray, who is too straightforward and simpleminded to play along with Roy's reverential trips down memory lane.

The vacuousness of Roy's condition is brought into sharp focus with the arrival of his former school chum Cletis (Steve Fite), the nerdy son of the local hardware store owner. Cletis' hero worship of Ray's older brother sets up a sadly comical series of events that strips the already life-enraged Roy of everything he still holds dear. Ironically, even extreme misfortune doesn't really change anything for this man whose psyche has been crippled beyond repair.

Swayze (HBO's "Carnivale") charges through Roy's plight with vein-bulging fury, tempered by well-executed moments of comedic charm. He lends emotional veracity to this damaged vet, who has no plan for life other than to pop open another bottle of Lone Star. Swayze also possesses a melodious low baritone singing voice that works its way through Hank Williams' "Your Cheatin' Heart" and snatches of other ditties.

Swayze's Roy is complemented perfectly by Patted's Ray, an intellectually subpar small-towner who grows to understand he is not inferior to his sibling. Patted impressively reveals each point in Ray's evolution to the moment at which he can finally confront his brother with the truth about Roy's beloved wife and pink Cadillac car.

Fite's totally fatuous Cletis offers a hilarious, much-needed break from the Roy/Ray confrontations. His insipid, inane dealings with Ray offer an awe-inspiring look at a dangerously clueless soul -- who will probably make good in his desire to someday go into politics.

Sets, Victoria Profitt; lighting, J. Kent Inasy; sound, David Bartlett; stage manager, Dean Kreyling, reviewed April 10, 2005. Runs through May 15. Running time: 90 MIN.