

BACKSTAGE WEST

THE ACTOR'S RESOURCE

March 25, 2004

SUBURBIA

Critics Pick

The setting is the parking lot of a 7-Eleven store in a fictional Middle-American burg and the time period is unspecified. These ambiguities imbue Eric Bogosian's mesmerizing portrait of suburban malaise with a hauntingly ethereal quality, as the action unfolds in a dramatic universe that seems to exist somewhere between *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Rent*, with a hint of *West Side Story*. Yet the distinctively angry voice that we have come to expect from Bogosian is much in evidence, infusing this work with a sharply lacerating point of view. Director Alex Craig Mann leads a flawless ensemble in parlaying the taut and darkly comic piece into a shattering tour-de-force effort.

Bogosian's view of disillusioned and directionless American youths is juxtaposed against the futile hopes of immigrants seeking the American dream. Among the slackers who drive a Pakistani convenience-store proprietor (Al Faris) crazy by loitering in front of his business are the nitwit skateboarder Buff (J. Scott Shonka), the racist and homophobic Air Force dropout Tim (Marty Papazian), and the more sensible but equally rootless Jeff (Adam Hendershott). Jeff's feisty girl friend Sooze (Natalie Avital) has dreams of making it in New York with her performance-art routines, while her sad-eyed friend Bebe (Sam Sloyan) struggles to overcome chemical addictions. The dramatic catalyst arrives in the form of the pals' former classmate Pony (Michael Pette), who has skyrocketed to fame as a rock idol. He pulls up in a limo to pay a visit, with his rich-bitch publicist Erica (Jennifer Grace Cook) in tow. This generates jealousy and resentment among the underachieving local denizens, as the successful foreign businessman stirs up additional animosity. Bogosian tantalizingly pushes our buttons with red-herring hints of impending violence, eventually socking it to us in a knockout climax.

Without exception, the performances are triumphant. Sloyan's woebegone waif is fascinating throughout. Papazian's loose-cannon cynic is a carefully calibrated characterization that slowly builds in intensity. Hendershott marvelously depicts his character's contradictions—the voice of calm who periodically loses his cool. Cook is amusing as a supposedly sophisticated professional letting her hair down in the ghetto. Shonka is appropriately over the top as the pea-brained dooper, and Pette hits all the right notes as a pompous celebrity brought down to earth. Avital brings a rich array of nuances to the role of the spirited wannabe star. Faris and Rashmi Rao are likewise superb as the beleaguered shop owners.

The exquisite design work merits mention: Victoria Profit's set, which masterfully melds the surrealistic with the gritty; J. Kent Inasy's wonderfully atmospheric lighting; and Stasha Surdyke's on-target costumes. Raucous humor dovetails with abject despair in this unrelentingly bleak black comedy.

"SubUrbia," presented by Camelot Artists Productions at the Skylight Theatre, 1816-1/2 N. Vermont, Los Feliz. Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 7 p.m. Mar. 20-Apr. 25. \$15-20. (310) 358-9936.