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Another Story of Symbolism As Complex as One, Two, Three

By Anita Gates

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The character's name is One, but most of the time she's Irene, who lives in a trailer, licks stamps for a living and never goes outdoors. Sometimes she opens a window and gazes at the moon. "I look at it and think about how I never really tried to get out of the trailer park," One (Gretchen Lee Krich) says.

When Irene was 15, she had a daughter, who is now 10 (and does go outdoors), and single parenthood is taking its toll. "I am feeding you straight from the vein now," she says to her girl. "I feed you what is left of my soul." Then she accidentally blurts out, "I want to destroy you and leave you and never come back." The daughter, understandably taken aback, walks out the door, makes a girl out of mud and brings her home.

This description probably makes Lisa D'Amour's "Anna Bella Eema" sound much more linear than it is. This is a skillfully stylized, successfully avant-garde one-act play, even if the symbolism become so dense that it's hard to see straight.

The three women -- One, Two (Monica Appleby as the daughter and others) and Three (April Matthis as the girl and others) -- spend most of the play sitting in 1950's-style dinette chairs behind TV trays. Each tray contains an assortment of objects, including, in the case of Ms. Krich, who joined the cast late, what appears to be a script.

The women talk to the audience about the mundane (a social worker's visit, the construction of a highway) and the nonhuman (wolves, owls, vampires). They do sound effects, like Ms. Appleby's inexplicably hilarious imitation of a pull-out sofa being opened. They turn into other characters, like Ms. Matthis's memorable Frankenstein's monster "disguised as a police officer." Sometimes the women sing, but not the standard show tunes.

Ms. D'Amour says the play is partly inspired by Ernest Thompson Seton's "Wild Animals I Have Known," from which she has included excerpts, and influenced in style by Cecil Michael's "Round Trip to Hell in a Flying Saucer." The melding of the two and Ms. D'Amour's own inspiration make for wise comment on identity, the violence and inevitability of separation, and the value of both adaptation and detailed self-awareness. Early in the play, the three women say in unison, "To be more than another set of bones wandering across the earth is to realize that you are just another set of bones wandering across the earth."

Katie Pearl has directed the play with dangerous, exhilarating conviction. Cameron Anderson's scenic design and Olivia Wildz's deliberately exaggerated costume design are a nice combination. Trailer park chic meets "The Waltons."

"Anna Bella Eema" continues, in repertory with Alva Rogers's "belly: three shorts," through Oct. 4. ANITA GATES