

January 30- Feb 5, 2004



STAGE DIRECTIONS

NEW RECOMMENDED PICK

Dramatizing a theater rehearsal would seem like a formula for catastrophe, with artists' squabbles and insider jokes being the base for a mountain of clichés. But playwright-performer L. Trey Wilson's comedy turns the rehearsal into a magnificently lucid exposé on the intricacies of homophobia within the African-American community though the ethnicity is largely beside the point. The play's fulcrum is a stage kiss: In a park-bench scene from a new play that looks a bit like Edward Albee's *Zoo Story*, straight actor Rod (Marc Ewing) is having a terrible time kissing stage partner Gary (Wilson), who is not only gay but a straight-o-phobic separatist, like a Malcolm X of the gay rights movement. Straight director Jay (William Christian) tries without much success to arbitrate a truce via a "staged" (hidden) kiss, a proposal which sets Gary on fire. The playwright *wrote* they should kiss, we should *do* it, he insists. Anything less is pandering to a straight audience. If they're uncomfortable, "fuck 'em." "The play also says you shoot yourself you gonna do that too?" Rod counters. The suited, overly groomed playwright (Kareem Ferguson) shows up with a pink box for a "cookie break" a delicate joke that's emblematic of Wilson's wry yet explosive wit. The ensemble, which also includes Chuma Hunter Gault, is awash in charisma, under Dan Bonnell's pinpoint staging. And chief among this production's many delights is watching Ewing's microscopic facial ticks that betray the underlying torment of an open-minded macho man forced to kiss another fella on the lips. After all, as everyone points out, didn't he read the play before he took on the role? Ensemble Studio Theater The L.A. Project at [Inside] the Ford, Hot Properties Series, 2580 Cahuenga Blvd. East, Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; thru Feb. 28. (323) 461-3673.
Written 01/29/2004 (Steven Leigh Morris)