

Second City shows the way to really fly

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BY DAREL JEVENS Staff Reporter

The composition of Second City troupes has fluctuated over the years, but it's unlikely there's ever been an ensemble made up of three men, three women and one disembodied voice.

The first sounds you hear in "Doors Open on the Right," the new revue on the Wells Street mainstage, are the chimes that every L rider knows as the preamble to a recorded announcement. Then up comes that familiar intonation, the very same authoritative yet avuncular voice that signals the stops on the CTA, only this time he's telling us to turn off cell phones and avoid flash photography.

You expect to begin moving shortly. And it doesn't take long.

Led by accomplished director Joshua Funk, the cast tears swiftly through its tour of contemporary anxieties. It's definitely rapid transit, seldom dwelling long enough for the ideas to get too deep or the scenery too tiresome.

The six actor-writers keep their ambitions modest, taking only light jabs at the big issues. But they are bold enough to theorize that the downturn of our day, the advent of all our current problems, can be traced to one dumb move by one dumb guy, and his name is Steve Bartman.

The Cubs fan's iconic cap and headphones make many appearances in this show, from an initial re-creation of his fateful fly ball to logical extensions involving babies and missiles. The running joke works on a couple of levels, both as a neat little metaphor and as an image that's universally known but local enough to make future tourist audiences feel like insiders.

Except for the occasional diorama of screeching dinosaurs -- a commentary on our refusal to really evolve -- the actors here get to play real people, not animals or aliens or abstract concepts. They're weird people, to be sure, but ones with traits we all see in everyday life: the irritation of an accountant (Dan Bakkedahl) whose rich bimbo client (Liz Cackowski) fails to appreciate her outlandish tax advantages, the despair of a wife (Jean Villepique) wishing her well-meaning mate (Brian Boland) could read the profound undercurrent of her anecdotes, the inner turmoil of three women (Lisa Brooke is the third) blurting out repressed secrets ("I still check my ex-boyfriend's voice mail!") in the throes of deep massage.

The writing here is especially crisp, enough to salvage such formulaic premises as a town meeting overrun by yahoos or a hapless victim of technology run amok (this time the automated checkout lane at the supermarket). Several scenes -- the massage bit, some explanations of why voters opt for President Bush or assorted Democrats -- just pile on the one-liners, and good ones at that ("I'm voting for Wesley Clark because he's a Democratic general, and I believe he'll bomb countries in a kinder, gentler way").

And every once in a while the CTA guy pipes up again to deliver a punch line or send us off to intermission.

Except for alpha male Boland, a carryover from last spring's "No, Seriously, We're All Gonna Die," all of these actors are making their mainstage debuts, and there's not a weak link among

them. Antoine McKay, imported from Second City Detroit, shows terrific range as Al Sharpton, a whole series of characters hanging around City Hall, and a couch potato whose sports TV possession has to be exorcised with Merlot and Pottery Barn catalogs. Brooke, from the Toronto company, has nice prickly turns as a fourth-grade teacher beguiled by a visiting Marine and a lesbian irked by the gawking she gets from single dads at a school pageant. Cackowski gives good goofy, sometimes with an ebullience reminiscent of her big brother, mainstage veteran Craig Cackowski.

Their placement on Second City's primary stage is a confidence booster, too. This bunch seems to have the youth and the inspiration to energize this operation a few times over. Sometimes it's nerve-racking seeing a show full of veterans at peak form, knowing they're bound to depart before long and leave a void. Not so with these newcomers. Our worries are being allayed, because crews at Second City are working on the track ahead.

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