

The American Living Room
 Here Arts Center
 145 Sixth Avenue
 Festival continues through September 2

On the Couch

The American Living Room returns to Here, sofas intact

BY JOHN BEER

With its comfy chairs and amiable atmosphere, Here's American Living Room festival aims to invest cutting-edge theater with the cozy familiarity of a night in front of the TV. It's a winning strategy: Now in its 18th year, the festival drew capacity audiences for its opening weekend. The three pieces performed—the first of 24 in the festival—displayed impressive technique and quirky imagination. At the same time, each fit a bit too easily into its experimental genre: meta-theatrical whimsy, abstract dance-theater, and biographical study of a neglected historical figure. These patterns gave the works a tentative flavor: They seem poised to meet one's idea of a good theater piece, not to change it.

Pete McCabe's play *In the Company of Trees* employs a few tricks that would have been long in the tooth at the first American Living Room (which also opened with one of his plays). After an uncomfortable initial pause, the first of two unnamed Men (James Scruggs) declares, "I'm bored." Eventually, the Men, along with the Woman (Caitlin Summer Mulhern), discover the Audience and realize their status as Characters in a Play. Despite the sense of Avant-Garde 101 that such goings-on inspire, *Trees* largely succeeds in creating a compelling theatrical world. McCabe exploits his knack for rhythmic modulation, which as director he supports with deft pacing, seamlessly shifting his characters from fairy tale scenarios in a forest to love triangles on an airplane. Embedding stories within stories, the piece matches the improvisatory spirit of Al McCabe's accompanying music. *Trees* takes a determined shark-jump in its final minutes, though, when it ties its rambling meditations to the events of September 11; rather than conferring deeper significance on the play, the move seems forced, a lapse of faith in the fabulist spirit of the preceding 80 minutes.

Sun Sheets and Small Shoes, choreographed and designed by Michael Bodel in conjunction with his dancers (Jenny Hipscher, Lana Wilson, Hannah Lundeen, and Rishauna Zumberg), offers an altogether more enigmatic and evocative experience. Bodel has a talent for conjuring striking and mysterious images; this quietly tormented and mournful piece at its best moments resembles Robert Wilson without the European arts funding. Women twist and fold themselves along with bedsheets that, as they hang from a line transversing the stage, seemingly mutate into flags and shrouds. The dancers take baby steps with baby shoes they hold on the ends of hinged control rods; a miniature picket fence slowly glides across the back of the space. A lingering absence suffuses the piece, most visible in the empty pairs of shoes that emerge, tied to the clothesline, toward the end, but also apparent in the ghostly half-life that the dancers' movements grant to the sheets. Like the Appalachian music that backs most of the dance, *Sun Sheets* is at once spirited and melancholy, an apt answer to war-haunted times.

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At the turn of the 20th century, Henrietta Leavitt defied pervasive institutional sexism to become a staff member at the Harvard Observatory, where she pioneered the study of the correlation between apparent and actual star brightness. In *Absolute Brightness*, Sharptoolstheatre juxtaposes Leavitt's story with cameos by such luminaries as Mark Twain and Giordano Bruno. A striking conceit livens up what might otherwise seem at times like a PBS special: The theatrical space is kept mostly dark, illuminated only by small spots, flashlights, and laser pointers. Besides simply looking cool, this visual ploy usefully evokes both the petty ignorance that condemned Leavitt to obscurity (and Bruno to death) and the cosmic enigmas that she helped to unravel. Marya Errin Jones and Peter Deffet perform the numerous characters of this elliptical drama with crisp clarity, ably navigating the piece's multiple historical layers. Like their subject, they opt for craft over ambition, an honorable choice perhaps too much in evidence in this Living Room.



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*Absolute
 Brightness*