

SAN DIEGO THEATRE SCENE

"CURTAIN CALLS" #218

By Pat Launer

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## Uplifting

The term "lift" has been used in reference to stealing. But it also has several other metaphorical meanings in the **Playwrights Project's** latest touring production. *Lifted* is a commissioned work by Annie Weisman Macomber, who first performed with Playwrights Project as a teen, took her first playwriting course with PP, and went on to win the statewide contest (Plays By Young Writers) in 1992. Having premiered works at the La Jolla Playhouse and South Coast Repertory Theatre, she's currently a much-in-demand playwright/screenwriter based in L.A. But part of her heart is still in San Diego.

*Lifted* is one of the strongest of the Playwrights Project's touring productions. The play itself feels hip and relevant to kids, with its teasing, rapid-fire young-adult dialogue and its hip hop rhythms. And its message, about taking responsibility, is woven into the storyline in various ways. The theme of acting for the 'greater good' gets hammered home one or two times too many. But the day I was there, with a middle school group at the City Heights Library, instead of the typical 'How long did it take you to memorize your lines?', one audience member demonstrated complete understanding of the play by asking a truly incisive question: 'Have *you* ever done anything you regretted?' As always, Playwrights Project founder Deborah Salzer steered the discussion in the most informative and inspiring ways. These kids totally 'got' what the play was trying to say and do, and one can only hope they walked away better for having had the experience.

The play focuses on two young, fairly immature men who work in the stockroom at the superstore Big Buy. ("No girl wants to talk to a stockboy!," one opines). Henry (Sidney Franklin) is the dreamer, the plan-maker, the pathological liar who comes from a lousy background, with an alcoholic mom and an imprisoned sister. Todd (Michael C. Freeling) has a stable family -- a mother (Monique Gaffney) who's a manager at the store and a father who's on disability from an injury he sustained at Big Buy. They all have the same hard-nosed, insensitive boss (Fred Harlow). Incessantly bragging, fanstasizing and goofing off, Henry will do anything to attract the attention of Tamala (Rachael van Wormer), also an employee. And that includes a late-night heist of the latest shipment of the Mythos X2, "the greatest invention since the iPod." When Todd rejects the plan, Henry insists that "It's not stealing; it's lifting." The guys do heavy lifting as part of their job, and that's what caused Todd's father's back injury. After the damage has been done and repaired, Todd does a rap about 'the greater good' and everyone is Lifted up to a higher plane. The ending may be a little too neat, but it's a short play, and much to its credit, it kept the kids at rapt attention.

Part of that is due to the outstanding performances. Under the precise direction of D. Candis Paule, each actor is quite credible, but the two 'boys' are especially excellent; 17 year-old Franklin is perfect as the hypervocal cool-kid wannabe, and Freeling (who, at 24, looks a lot younger) is super as his deeper, more thoughtful but easily swayed sidekick. Van Wormer underplays her disinterested teen role, and that works fine. The adults often fare poorly in kid-oriented plays, but Gaffney's Mom is something of a saint (though she refuses to talk to her son for some time after the robbery nearly causes her to lose her job). And Harlow, a nasty boss if there ever was one, makes a (barely believable) turnaround at the end. He's amusing as the beatnik-looking, beret-wearing owner of an Open Mic/spoken word club; an anachronistic look, but it suited him well.

The set, designed by Beeb Salzer, is a wonder - a series of screens that open and close on each other to provide four different locale. Magical - and magically portable!

One could nitpick about some of the dramatic elements of *Lifted*, but the piece is extremely satisfying. And the proof was in the faces and comments (and attentive silence!) of the students. Kudos to all. It's just too bad that the public evening performance was canceled due to the fires; a pity that more adults won't get to see this delightful production.