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THURSDAY, AUGUST 11, 2011

## Review: 'The Twentieth-Century Way' at Walking Fish

By Howard Shapiro  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Is acting a form of entrapment? If you're in the audience and you buy into a play, the answer is clearly, yes: You've been fooled, and a willing participant.

Is entrapment a form of acting? That's a tougher question, posed by Tom Jacobson's play *The Twentieth-Century Way*, which uses an incident in Long Beach, Calif., almost a hundred years ago to explore the question.

I was not entirely entrapped by the play that opened Wednesday night at Walking Fish Theatre in Kensington, although Karen Case Cook's stark production became more impressive by degrees as it unfolded. But Jacobson's play, which tries to do too much and takes about 10 minutes too long to do it, is provocative. While I was watching it, I found it sometimes silly and other times compelling — not an unquestionable success or an outright failure. Yet after I left the theater, I mulled over its themes and what it challenged us to consider, and I began to appreciate it.

I also decided that you have to sort out *The Twentieth-Century Way*, whose title is a euphemism (in the play, at least) for oral sex among men, after it's over; it's either too rich or too convoluted, depending on your view. (I tend toward the latter.) Jacobson, a writer from Los Angeles, has two actors — they appear to be waiting for their movie-role auditions — enter into an acting game of improvisation about police entrapment of gay men.

The set-up for this little game is pure nonsense — an awkward conversation that could come only from a pretentious script. But once the game between the two revs up, the play becomes interesting. The subject for



From left, Thomas Raniszewski, Peter Danzig

the game is a real incident in 1914, when police infiltrated a group of Long Beach men — among them, well-respected townies — who were hooking up for sex among themselves, then hit them with a charge of “social vagrancy” but not oral sex, which wasn’t a crime. (It later became one for a substantial period, which the play attributes to the nabblings by Long Beach police.)

*The Twentieth-Century Way* is earnestly performed by Peter Andrew Danzig and Thomas Raniszewski, who play all the roles skillfully except for those they are originally given — the two actors waiting for auditions, characters they deliver as forced and unbelievable. The playwright’s conceit has these two men explore the nature of acting by improvising the Long Beach entrapment, and in turn examining the natures of trust and love, vice and virtue, prejudice and victimization. In the course of this, they shift in and out of the people they’re supposed to be and the people they’re supposed to be playing.

That’s a lot going on in a 100- minute one-act. The play begins to cave from its weight, particularly when it confuses the idea of acting in a theater with acting in a sting to deceive real people. The two men, playing their original characters or maybe their roles, end up naked in a scene that may show their original intent when they began their game. Or maybe not. In any case, the scene is not gratuitous. At times, though, the play is.

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At Walking Fish Theatre, 2509 Frankford Ave., through Aug. 20. Tickets: \$18. Information: 215-427-9255 or [www.walkingfishtheatre.com](http://www.walkingfishtheatre.com).

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I did manage to see the show last night, and while I agree with some of Mr. Shapiro's analysis of the script, I found the two men who carried this play to have fully committed to the business of the piece and to their craft. The direction of the piece exuded masterful style and dignity in bringing to light such a delicate subject matter.

— fame521

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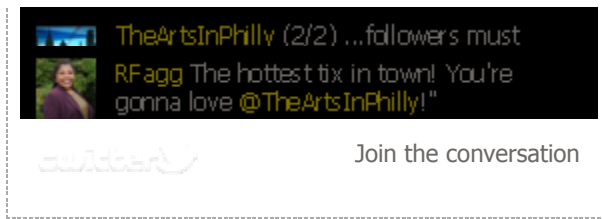
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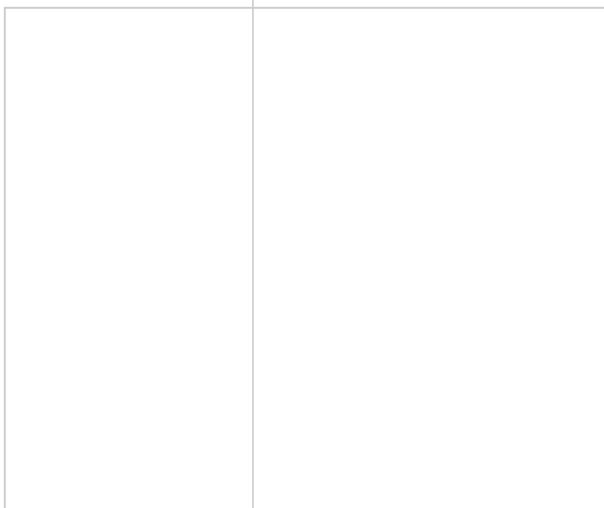
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