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UNDER THE SKIN. The roommate (Kathryn Winslow) of a gay dancer dead from AIDS discovers how similar is his straight brother (Patrick Garrow). (Image by Xtra files)

Eighties gem

THEATRE REVIEW / A slice of dysfunctional North American pie

story by David Bateman / Xtra Jun 12 2003

■ *Burn This*, Lanford Wilson's 1980s drama, resonates with gay themes in a subtle way that depends largely upon a complex discussion of gender. The original production, starring John Malkovich, was an exercise in fast paced, laugh-a-minute-cry-the-next theatrics. Malkovich wore a very convincing wig that was likened to Theda Bera's Cleopatra by one reviewer. Last year Edward Norton took on the starring role off-Broadway. I suspect he was fabulous.

The play begins with the news that a gay dancer has died tragically. When his brother appears to remove his siblings' belongings from the apartment he shared with an advertising queen and a straight choreographer, the audience notices similarities between brothers. Twenty years ago I was astounded by the possibility that my own brother and I could have anything in common physically. I mince. He swaggers. This play forced me, against my fey will, to recognize the slippage that occurs between genders. Ultimately, my very straight brother is a pansy, too. He just hides it better than I do.

Wilson's dialogue uses references to cooking and clothing in order to make subtle gender connections, and depends upon a lead actor who can be abrasive, hostile, frightening and irresistible all at the same time. The Little Fish Co-op production, currently running at Tallulah's Cabaret, succeeds beautifully. Patrick Garrow as Pale, the straight brother, dons a macho "accent" and bounces around the stage in a cocaine-induced, neurotic frenzy that is layered with fine emotional nuance.

James Greenwood as Larry consistently stops the show with well-paced one-liners. This may be the only problem with the play. Wilson created yet another gay drama that hinges upon death as the initial conflict and embroiders it with a somewhat shallow gay stereotype. Greenwood's marvelous performance moves the laughable/lovable cliché beyond what could have descended into vacuous drivel.

Kathryn Winslow as the straight dancer/choreographer delivers a very cool and sophisticated performance that dives into believable emotional depth adeptly and at a moment's notice. And her outfits are divine. The original production sported leg warmers. But that was the '80s. Neil Girvan gives a fine performance as Burton. His role makes for remarkably entertaining connections to "gayness" as his story intertwines with same-sex blowjobs and the identity of the dead brother's cocaine-happy sibling.

Lighting, by Josh Schwebel, gives the piece an elegant, stylized quality that cuts the naturalism at just the right moments. Matthew Kutas (director) and Evan Tsitsias (co-director) have mastered a small platform stage that could have become restricting with less skilled blocking and performances.

This slice of the dysfunctional North American pie describes Canada as "cold, snowy and exhausting." It asks the timeless question regarding prairie life: "What sustains these people?" Now I ask you? Who can resist such remarkable and poignant comedy? Not I.