

THEATER REVIEW

Route 66 debuts with 'Average Day'

By Chris Jones | Chicago Tribune critic

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The Route 66 Theatre Company made an auspicious, hopeful debut this weekend. This new Equity troupe seems to have its act together - starting with its name. Using the Mother Road as guiding principle seems savvy. You feel as if you know what you're signing up for when you buy a ticket: dramas of the parched heartland, linked by the desperation of the lonely, dusty road.

And Route 66 has further significance: It joins Chicago and Los Angeles. Unlike the busy trajectory between Chicago and New York, the theatrical road from Chicago to L.A. mostly gets ignored. Given the twin backgrounds of this experienced founding ensemble, that might change.

And thus in the spirit of all those things, the debut production is John Kolvenbach's "On an Average Day," an intensely elliptical two-hander about two desperate brothers in a filthy kitchen. It arrives from L.A., where it was staged by the Vs. Theatre Company.

It is produced at quite a high level in the old Body Politic space. The fine designer, Danny Cistone, has created a provocative box that's shoved so far forward in the space, it's right in the face of those in the front row. And it's crammed with stuff - beer cans, garbage, dishes, Christmas lights, potential weapons.

Kolvenbach (whose "Love Song" was produced at the Steppenwolf Theatre) is an interesting writer with an arresting linguistic turn. Sure, "On an Average Day" is one of those familiar dramas wherein two brothers beat each other to a pulp even as we try and figure out the event in the past that provoked so much Sturm und Drang. There is a resemblance to "True West." But Kolvenbach also has a softer, quirkiest side and the result makes for quite a pleasing and provocative tension of genres. Assuming you have actors of the quality on display here.

Articulate, handsome and weirdly vulnerable, Johnny Clark plays the low-status-bro,



Robert. Clark, who has been in L.A., has acquired some of that designer-stubble, edgy-actor stuff, which Chicago will need to excise. But he's got the chops. No question. Clark's Robert finds his squalid little world invaded by Stef Tovar's Jack, who seems to have acquired a white collar but otherwise failed to escape. Tovar is in fine fettle, powering his way through the scenes and managing an intense investment even while standing slightly outside the torrid combat. By the end, the two men climb inside your skin.

Bizarrely, perhaps, this new theater company is offering a (visitor-friendly) retro Chicago experience, an iconic, in-your-face representation of what the Off-Loop experience is supposed to be like. But there is some venturing outside the city limits here and a fresh-feeling understanding that Chicago theater has always drawn from the road.

"On an Average Day"

When: Through Sept. 6

Where: Victory Gardens Greenhouse
2257 N. Lincoln Ave.

Running Time: 1 hour and 45 minutes

Tickets: \$20 at (773) 871-3000



On An Average Day

By **JOHN KOLVENBACH**

Directed by **RON KLIER**
with **JOHNNY CLARK** and **STEF TOVAR**

Associate Producers **JOHNNY CLARK** and **JAMES ROONEY**
Scenic Design **DANNY CISTONE** • Art Direction **JOE DALLO**
Lighting Design **JESSE KLUG** • Sound Design **RON KLIER**
Costume Design **GELAREH KHALIOUN** and **ERIN MUELLER**
Fight Choreography **NED MOCHEL** • Production Manager **PREETI NATH**
Stage Manager **CAROLE URSETTI** • Asst. Stage Manager **TOMMY DUNN**
Graphic Design **MARTY HIGGINBOTHAM** and **LIESEL KOPP**
Public Relations **NOREEN HERON** and **ASSOCIATES**