

## **MANISH BOY**

Written & Performed by Ralph Harris

Directed by Oz Scott

Associate Producer Zadia Ifé

Blumenthal Performing Arts Center

Booth Playhouse

June 22 - 27, 2010

The best comedy comes out of character, truth, and pain. Comedian Ralph Harris' *Manish Boy* is a one-man show that folds all three into the story of how one man grew up to become the person he is today.

One-person shows have become more popular recently; they are easier to mount. But it is also difficult to keep an audience entertained for a straight 90 or so minutes with only one actor on stage. No worries here. This polished, insightful show is engaging from the moment the lights go up with Mr. Harris at the microphone giving a nod to what must have been many years of standup comedy in small, tough rooms. The microphone, fittingly, is at the back of the stage because what follows is actually storytelling where Mr. Harris recounts the funny, embarrassing, painful, exhilarating trajectory of his growth from boy to man.

Like all comedians, he's very quick, and will respond to audiences' comments, or unexpected mechanical noises, with sharp humor. Yet, my favorite parts of the show are his character studies of the people in his life while growing up: his Uncle Earl, his mother's friend Betty, his Grandfather, and his own childhood and teenage selves. It shows not only his powers of observation but the need to understand himself, others, and life. He is also fortunate to have had loving people who cared enough to teach him what is right. His acting and transformation into these people is impressive.

Yet, he nails chronic alcoholics' dual personalities, as exemplified by his "Happy Dad," and the "Demon Dad," who can be full of personality making breakfast on a Saturday morning for his children, and then be an abusive, raging drunk who will grab his son by the throat and almost squeeze the life out of him.

It isn't easy to cut yourself open every night to let audiences see what you are made of, but comedians do it all the time, only most not as successfully as Mr. Harris has done here. He leaves it all on the stage as he works hard for the audience. He isn't asking for pity and doesn't make excuses for any of his own mistakes. It's a gift to be able to look back on the early part of your life humorously, but realistically, without bitterness or regret.

What comes across is a decent, funny, caring man who respects women. His growing up years may be uniquely his own, but there is a universality to his memories. How many of us had perfect, happy childhoods? Ralph Harris shows he's developed into a formidable writer and performer with this energetic and versatile display of his work. The show is running until June 27th at the Booth Playhouse. What are you waiting for??

**Review by Ann Marie Oliva**

Ann Marie Oliva is a local playwright and freelance writer. She is the producer/editor of ARTS à la Mode and a judge for the National Youth Theatre Awards. Ann Marie is a member of the Dramatists Guild of America.