

The Muscle in Our Toes

Reviewed by Jon Steely

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Given that the whole high-school experience lasts only a few years, it's amazing how long the effects resonate in our collective consciousness. And because these years are so crucial to the development of permanent self-esteem, do we ever really get over them?

Playwright Stephen Belber's humorous new play is happy to keep the high-school-reunion genre alive, poking at it from unique angles to give it a fresh and funny twist. A 20-year reunion for the class of 1988 provides the setting for a handful of high school chums—Reg (Michael Benyaer), Dante (Al Espinosa), Les (Daniel Milder), and Phil (Bill Tangradi)—to come together. Deciding to distance themselves from the lame event's pettiness, they seek refuge in the school's music room, where they respond to rumors that their old friend Jim (Keith Ewell) has been kidnapped by considering a rather radical scheme to save him from his terrorist captors.

Belber and director Jennifer Chambers, both keenly in touch with the comedic timing and sense of play found only in friendships formed by shared adolescent experiences, pour a flood of booze, locker-room insults, and teenage memories across the stage. All cast members turn in solid performances, particularly Tangradi, whose character has tagged along to his big brother's reunion as a reminder of the archetypical, energetic younger prick we used to love and hate back in the '80s. A drunken Carrie (Kristen Lee Kelly) pops in from time to time to let everyone know that loneliness and depression are only amplified as the big 4-0 approaches.

As the old gang plots Jim's escape, they also embark on a parallel journey to do something meaningful with their nearly middle-aged lives, to break what has now become the humdrum pattern of their grown-up, yawn-producing existences. It winds up in a place nobody living a mundane, almost 40-something life would ever go. And it all kind of makes you wish you had a reunion coming up.

Presented by Green Beetle Productions at the El Portal Forum Theatre, 5269 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. May 30–June 28. Thu.–Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.

(866) 811-4111. www.musclesinourtoes.com or www.ovationtix.com.