

Tales of the Wretched With a Seedy Author

By DAVID DeWITT

Cult figures are a curious lot, strange to some but strangely appealing to others. The writer Charles Bukowski, known for his coarse and comic devotion to the seedy side of life, is plenty strange, and his portrayal is the appealing center of "South of No North (Stories of the Buried Life)" at the 29th Street Rep.

The play, adapted by the co-directors Leo Farley and Jonathan Powers from the writer's 1973 short story collection of the same name, dramatizes nine tales of the drunk, brutal, ridiculous and downtrodden characters who populate Bukowski's prose. Here we see bittersweet romance, cartoonish burlesque and violent melodrama, acted by an able seven-person ensemble in multiple roles.

But onstage — as perhaps in life — the writer proves more engaging than his stories. Here Bukowski is a grizzled, shaggy-haired, bespectacled alcoholic who types with speed and innocent glee as he channels his fictional universe to the page, rolling from tale to tale as if possessed by a muse with a taste for bawdy humor and cruel melancholia.

Stephen Payne plays Bukowski, who died in 1994, with an expressive mix of pleasure and sadness. He inhabits his grimy apartment (designed with telling detail by Mark Szymczak) with a homebody's touch, absently sorting cigarette butts or adjusting the volume of his classical music. In his private domain, Bukowski laughs, cries, drinks, despairs and creates.

When he and his stories intersect, the results can be revealing, funny and surprisingly theatrical.

Most notable is "Love for \$17.50," in which a pudgy jilted man buys a beautiful mannequin to be his surrogate lover. Safe at home, the man (convincingly played by Tim Corcoran) explores the artificial body with an enthusiastic romantic fervor — then interjects a brutal slap before a bout of angry sex. The slap is a gasp-provoking moment, and it is no less so when Mr. Payne's Bukowski wanders into the scene to handle the mannequin with a similar misogynistic desire that appears quite out of his control.

This Bukowski is no simple romantic hero of the disenfranchised, and

SOUTH OF NO NORTH Stories of the Buried Life

By Charles Bukowski; adapted and directed by Leo Farley and Jonathan Powers; set by Mark Szymczak; sound by Gerard Drake; lighting by Stewart Wagner. Presented by 29th Street Rep. Tim Corcoran and Dac Mogentale, artistic directors. At 212 West 29th Street, Manhattan.

WITH: Tim Corcoran, Elizabeth Elkins, Pamela Ericson, Paula Ewin, Stephen Payne, Thomas Wehrle and Charles Willey.

Charles Bukowski is injected into his own short stories.

"South of No North" is most involving when it unfurls this rare psyche through such complex moments, when Bukowski keys into his pathetic characters with frightened identification or amused sympathy.

Mr. Payne finds humor and pathos in the role, chortling over a big-breasted cowgirl and bewailing the fate of a onetime tryst. Even his narration, with its languorous hold on words even as his sentences round to a close, suggests the writer's intoxication with the life of his mind. It is a rich performance.

Mr. Payne also plays Bukowski's literary surrogate, Henry Chinaski, a character in some of the stories. The appeal of these vignettes is spotty, particularly in the tiring second act, and neither they nor the episodic structure offers much narrative or emotional drive. Elizabeth Elkins, Paula Ewin and Mr. Corcoran deliver heartfelt moments with sure-footed restraint, and Stewart Wagner's lighting freely accents the show's playful and dark tones. Other moments, however, feel loud and flat. If Mr. Payne's intriguing Bukowski is the string that connects the play, the tales are sometimes its disappointing knots.

"South of No North" ends with "Class," a comic fantasy boxing match between Henry and Ernest Hemingway (no cult figure he). Henry wins, but has no rewarding epiphany. Just as well; for this Bukowski, the "buried life" is appeal enough.

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NEW YORK, FRIDAY, MARCH 17, 2000

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