

Bogosian is 'Drinking in America' ... on TV

Show's good, but 'Funhouse' was better

by Hunter Drohojowska

Eric Bogosian: Can this name and face be the makings of an entertainment star? You've seen his argyle face in *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, read the rave reviews in the *New York Times*, maybe even heard that his hit off-Broadway solo show, "Drinking in America," also won an Obie for original writing. Now "Drinking in America" has finally made it to the West Coast... well, sort of. Bogosian's play can be seen in an abbreviated form on Cinemax, airing tomorrow night at 10. (It will be repeated at the same time on Thursday and July 3, 8 and 12.)

Bogosian's style is to inhabit a collection of bizarre characters. His lineup might be found in a police station at midnight. In the all too brief half hour, we meet a deranged druggie with some sick ideas about how to spend a Saturday night aided by Quaaludes, pot and booze. "I want to paa-a-a-arty," he shrieks, and a chill runs up your spine. This is the true party animal

who thinks anything less than wholesale destruction of life and property is a bummer of an evening. You've noticed shades of his behavior in your mechanic, hints in the mobile home residents around Venice Beach, caught glimmers in the grinning politicians' campaign ads.

We also meet a character borrowed from Bogosian's "Funhouse" performance of last year, an obese fellow who loves his calamari fried, his pie with whipped cream, and who seems dedicated to eating himself to death. But, he reasons: "You eat, you die; you don't eat, you die. I'd rather eat."

Then there's the fellow hawking pills, guaranteeing that you *can* eat all those goodies while never gaining an ounce — and if you believe him, you'll fall for Bogosian's Moral Majority preacher pleading for money. "Help send Satan back to Russia!"

Bogosian's characters are always buying or selling, reminding us that the business of America is business. They are comically offensive and terrifyingly identifiable, such as the



Eric Bogosian presents some of his more unbalanced characters in "Drinking in America," which has come to TV, albeit in abbreviated form, via Cinemax.

Hollywood agent who wakes himself up with a few lines of cocaine washed down with a shot of bourbon. Although certainly they are caricatures, not one of them seems fictional, and you've met them all at one time or another.

Although "Drinking in America" on TV is only half as long as when performed off-Broadway, the piece powerfully mirrors a culture obsessed with the sexual and sensual, like Freud's child who cannot think beyond what goes in the mouth. Bogosian's feel-good America has

little in common with the fiction of those hard-working, good-hearted folks in the Miller beer ads, aside from the drinking. In Bogosian's America, everyone is fighting against the incursion of that nagging unpleasantness known as reality.

This ceaseless examination of the schism between appearance and reality puts Bogosian in the company of other solo performers and performance artists ranging from Spalding Gray and Lily Tomlin to Laurie Anderson and Ann

Magnuson. Like them, he works best off the response of a live audience. So here comes the bad news.

On television, and as directed by Jay Dubin, "Drinking in America" is oddly flat, posed and uncomplimentary to Bogosian's considerable talents. Bogosian's performances normally rattle the theater with a frighteningly hypnotic energy resembling an evangelist's tent meeting, a sidewalk rap artist performance or a sizzling rock concert. All the moves and lines are here, but imprisoned by the glass box. It's all too safe, eccentric and dismissible. I'd hoped to excuse this by simply saying it's the nature of the television medium. But it isn't.

The piece for Cinemax was taped in a studio without a live audience. Although glossily produced, with sets and costume changes not possible in the live version, it compares poorly to the involving videotape of Bogosian's "Funhouse" last year at L.A.'s Matrix Theater. Directed by Jo Bonney (who is also Bogosian's wife) and taped live by local writer Lewis MacAdams, "Funhouse" has caught Bogosian's lunacy and crude danger. If you want to see Bogosian at his best as a performer, I'm afraid you'll have to venture to EZTV, where the "Funhouse" tape is for sale.

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