

ARTS EVENTS

Dogs' Journey

In Ground Floor Theatre's *Dex & Abby*, the bond of love between canines and humans is tenderly expressed

BY TREY GUTIERREZ

Serious question: How could a pet owner read a tagline like "What if you and your dog could talk?" and not be immediately enthralled? I'd like to think it was my love of unique storytelling that drove me to attend *Dex & Abby*, but if I'm being honest, it was because I'm a dog person. By celebrating the bonds we cherish with our four-legged companions, playwright Allan Baker's latest work aims to pull the heart-strings of animal lovers.

Despite its far-out premise, Ground Floor Theatre's world premiere, directed by Robert Tolaro, grounds itself in reality. The story of the titular canines is as much the story of their owners, Sean and Corey – a couple taking their relationship to the next level by moving in together. The uncertainties these

young partners face is reflected by the rivalry of their pets, who compete for both affection and attention.

As the title implies, the backbone of the show is the portrayals of Dex and Abby by Jason Graf and Cassidy Timms, respectively.

Most impressive is these performers' primal physicality. Graf and Timms carry themselves with excitable, purposeful energy that's no doubt the end result of studying canine mannerisms. Whether they're getting riled up for walks or snuggling up to their humans, it's difficult to see these actors as anything but lovable house pets. The sincerity these two bring to their roles creates believable bonds between dogs and humans.

Fueled by these genuine character connections, Baker's script focuses on the seemingly mundane moments that make up life: dinners with friends, evenings on the couch, late-night heart-to-hearts, etc. While Baker succeeds in creating a realistic slice-of-life piece, it often comes at the expense

of narrative momentum. Certain scenes (predominantly in Act I) feel weighed down by meandering dialogue and lack of focus. That's not to say there aren't moments of well-executed character development, but for every scene that advances the plot, another



DEX & ABBY
Ground Floor Theatre,
979 Springdale
www.groundfloorthatre.org
Through June 1
Running time: 2 hr.



(l-r) Jason Graf, Jacob Bernelle, Will Douglas, and Cassidy Timms in *Dex & Abby*

PHOTO BY DAVE HAWKS

feels like it's simply killing time in these characters' living room.

Despite these unfocused scenes, hidden away in *Dex & Abby*'s two-hour run time are all the elements of an engaging narrative. While I'm left with the impression that this show could be whittled down to an hour without losing any emotional weight, I was nonetheless moved by its displays of tenderness. Scenes where owners talk directly to their dogs, for example, reveal just how nuanced man's relationship with beast can be. Here we learn that Sean's family shunning him for his sexual orientation is mirrored by Abby's abandonment as a pup. Meanwhile, as Corey (Jacob Bernelle) begins to open his heart to

Sean (Will Douglas), he draws strength and comfort from Dex's undying loyalty.

Ultimately, *Dex & Abby* accomplishes what it sets out to do: give voice to the unspoken connection we feel with our furry friends. As a dog owner, I was moved by the heartbreaking conclusion. (I challenge any pup-parent lover not to cry at a tragic narrative involving a dog.) Afterward, I hugged my Jack Russell mix tighter than usual, though I couldn't help but reflect on the show's tagline. Based off what I saw, not much would change if our canine friends could talk. With unconditional love, dogs prove every day that they're man's best friend. Given the chance, it seems they'd only reaffirm this fact.

THEATRE

OPENING

CHICKENS IN THE YARD This new play by Paul Kruse explores the story of a family through the eyes of their four chickens, delving into memory, identity, queerness, and what it means to make a home. Directed by Alice Stanley, performed on the Vortex's outdoor stage. *May 24-June 2. Wed.-Sun., 8:30pm. The Vortex, 2307 Manor Rd., 512/478-5282. \$15-35. www.vortexrep.org.*

MAGICAL MONDAYS WITH NICK LEWIN The Tavern presents this world-renowned conjuror and stand-up comedian within a night of magic, music, and tasty appetizers. This intimate spectacle of modern mystification and comedy happens on the last Monday of each month, with Lewin as the headliner, the delightful Little Jewford waxing lyrical and tripping the keyboard fantastic, and special guests enhancing each show. *Mon., May 27, 7:30pm. The Tavern, 922 W. 12th, 512/320-8377. \$20. www.tavernaustin.com.*

HAMILTON This, in case you somehow didn't know (and please accept our congratulations on finally waking up from that years-long coma, yo, it's good to have you back), is Lin-Manuel Miranda's hip-hop musical about America's Founding Father Alexander Hamilton. Brought to town by the good people of Broadway in Austin, it's a phenomenon that's worthy

of its endless hype, and they say tickets are possibly still available: See the website for the show's two-days-before ticket lottery. *May 28-June 16. Tue.-Fri., 8pm; Sat., 2 & 8pm; Sun., 1 & 7pm. Bass Concert Hall, 2350 Robert Dedman, 512/471-2787. \$79-539. www.texasperformingarts.org.*

AN EVENING OF LIGHT Some variety shows are better than others, right? We're suggesting that this is one of the better ones, as the Cinnamon Path folks stack the deck of their fourth event with the talents of Laura Freeman, Anna Larson, Turning Tricks with the Darlings, Amber Bixby, Cami & Zach, Raul Garza, Ava Love Hanna, and more. Note, which we see as a bonus: This fun show's gonna have some "mature, adult content." And proceeds will benefit VELA Families. *Wed., May 29, 8pm. Ground Floor Theatre, 979 Springdale, 512/827-9474. \$15. www.cinnamonpath.com.*

HENRY V Penfold Theatre stages this Shakespearean wartime classic out in that fabled Round Rock Amphitheater in the park, featuring a fine cast directed by Liz Fisher. *May 30-June 22, Thu.-Sat., 8pm. Round Rock Amphitheater, 301 W. Bagdad, 12/850-4849. Free. www.penfoldtheatre.org.*

PARALLEL LIVES This cult-favorite comedy, written by Kathy Najimy and Mo Gaffney, features two actresses playing 25 odd characters in comic sketches examining the multifarious plight of women. Starring Roxy Becker and Helyn Rain Messenger, directed by Andy Berkovsky. *May 30-June 15. Thu.-Sat., 8pm; Sun., 3pm. Trinity Street Theatre, 901 Trinity, 512/524-2870. \$10-25. www.citytheatreAustin.org.*

TESTIFY: WAKING UP This latest iteration of the popular monthly series features true tales of opening eyes. They'll have stories of sexual re-awakenings, sleepwalking, narcolepsy, morning routines, and an incident with a Roomba. *Thu., May 30, 7:30pm. Spider House Ballroom, 2906 Fruth, 512/480-9562. \$5-6. www.testifyatx.com.*

CLOSING

SHAKESPEARE IN THE PARK: MERCHANT OF VENICE The Austin Shakespeare company, directed by Ann Ciccolella, brings all the romance, comedy, and dramatic clashes of this Shakespeare masterpiece to life on the hillside stage at Zilker Park. This iteration of the show is set in the Belle Époque of 1890s Italy – so there will be

plenty of gorgeous costumes – and, big bonus, the role of Shylock is performed by Marc Pouhé. *Through May 26. Thu.-Sun., 8pm. Beverly S. Sheffield Zilker Hillside Theater, 2206 William Barton Dr., 512/397-1463. Free. www.austinshakespeare.org.*

THE BALLAD OF KLOOK & VINETTE This contemporary new love story from Zach Theatre – it's a world-premiere musical, no less, infused with lyrical prose, jazz, blues, and soul – features two lost souls trying to find themselves in one another. Written by Ché Walker, Anoushka Lucas, and Omar Lyefook; directed by Dave Steakley, with musical direction by Christian Magby. *Through May 26. Wed.-Fri., 7:30pm; Sat., 2:30 & 7:30pm; Sun., 2:30pm. Zach Theatre's Kleberg Stage, 1421 W. Riverside, 512/476-0541. \$30-\$78. www.zachtheatre.org.*

ONGOING

WAKEY, WAKEY "Though the man telling the jokes is sitting down (he's in a wheelchair), dying is a stand-up routine in this glowingly dark, profoundly moving new play by Will Eno," states *The New York Times*. From the playwright of *Thom Pain* (based on nothing) comes this welcome work of theatre, embodied here by Ken Webster and Maria Latiolais; directed by Mark Pickell for Capital T Theatre. *Through June 1. Thu.-Sat., 8pm. Hyde Park Theatre, 511 W. 43rd, 512/479-7529. \$20-30. www.capitalt.org.*

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