



The The Local's Guide to Los Angeles and Southern California

## OUTWIT, OUTPLAY, OUTLAST: "EXTINCTION" @ ELEPHANT SPACE

By M.R. Hunter 12/03/2009

There can come a point when friendships naturally outgrow each other, but among men, expressing feelings can seem as icky and taboo as giving a guy a foot massage in the repressed emotional ritual of male bonding and fraternal brotherhood. NYU graduate Gabe McKinley's new play premiering at the Elephant Lab smartly exposes the caveman lurking underneath the skin of self-worth and identity between two male friends at odds with their personal growth and the betrayal change brings.

Startlingly frank, the somewhat competitive relationship that lies at the core of longtime pals explodes with a savage ferocity as revelations about who they are slowly come to light. It's been 14 months since oily, pharmaceutical sales rep Max (Michael Weston) and academic Finn (James Roday) have seen each other and a planned weekend in Atlantic City of inebriated debauchery quickly turns into a hellish, ethical nightmare of clashing principles. As Max attempts to rouse Finn with a brick of cocaine into a night of sex, drugs and fast money, he soon discovers that his one-time wingman has settled down into a nest with a new wife and a baby on the way. Undeterred by Finn's appeals of loyalty and maturity, Max needles, bribes, insults, and manipulates his former dorm mate into uneasy submission. Throw in a couple of prostitutes, Missy (Amanda Detmer) and her novice girlfriend, Victoria (Stefanie E. Frame) and the stakes only get higher.

The struggle for self-preservation turns into an all-out cockfight for domination and coercion as Finn and Max philosophically duke it out. Max uses women and drugs to deny his feelings, expecting Finn to go along for the ride, and ultimately uses money to force Finn's hand. Instead of accepting Finn's new life, Max threatens it with insidious doubts cast on Finn's new bride—a former classmate—and finally plays the last trump card in a match of wills that pushes Finn right over the edge. Meanwhile, the working girls play along, until Victoria becomes the sacrificial lamb for Finn's ultimate powerlessness.

McKinley finely exposes the alpha male kinship and the tacit agreements that keep these relationships alive. The male psyche with all its insecurities, competition, desires, and primal need to protect and survive is a fascinating, if not disturbingly accurate portrayal of the heterosexual male's inner conflict with acceptance and rejection by his peers. Somewhat relying on archetypal characters, McKinley nevertheless tackles the fraternal attitudes and



PHOTO BY KURT BOETCHER  
L to R: Amanda Detmer, Michael Weston, James Roday, Stefanie E. Frame  
"Extinction" by Gabe McKinley



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Michael Weston and James Roday  
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disappointments that arise when confronted by conflicting agendas. In order to evolve, men must either redefine their previous relationships or avoid them altogether if the risk of undoing is too great. Cracks of self-doubt, temptation and the need to belong are here perceived as weaknesses, exploited by the hedonistic Max with no such social mores to keep his urges in check. It is not so much then that Finn succumbs to Max as much as it is Max needing to control Finn in order to maintain the machismo status quo. Book smarts are no comparison for street smarts in the end, and intention has no guard against circumvention.

Set in Atlantic City's swankiest hotel, the Borgata, Kurt Boetcher keenly plays on the murky, grey area of themes with his stunning charcoal hued hotel rooms neatly divided by a scrim. Lighting by Mike Durst blends the right amount of ambiance and dimness, softening the dramatic finish with a chilling glow.

Wayne Kasserman smartly directs this dream cast featuring a who's who of rising and recognizable faces of TV and film that prove they have the chops for stage. Stefanie E. Frame and Amanda Detmer (from ABC's *Private Practice*) brilliantly nuance their roles with sympathetic feeling. Detmer expertly flips from hustling mother to a bubble-headed bimbo while exposing the undercurrent of shame that lies just beneath her tough exterior. Michael Weston of Fox's *House* is the kind of guy everyone loves to hate but skillfully portrays Max with a subtle balance of predatorily cunning charisma and frat boyish charm until his character seems justifiable, if still contemptible. Founder of the Red Dog Squadron and USA Network's Shawn Spencer in the hit series *Psych*, James Roday gives a spectacular performance with great care given to a complex role that waffles and defends until the shocking end when he acts out his brutal punishment. Together, Roday and Weston are electric, magnetic and compelling.

McKinley introduces a new species of the male-personified frenemy that might drag his knuckles around but carries a bigger club. Sharp, wry, and gripping, this sophisticated drama exposes the clash between men at varying stages of personal evolution, but the lingering question is which one will survive?

### "Extinction"

Runs through Dec 13

Fri & Sat at 8pm

Sundays at 7pm

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