

Performing Change

Play shows diverse battles of those struggling with HIV, AIDS viruses

By Jason Hardy

Staff writer

Like any area of mass concern in American society, the worldwide battle against AIDS has been both embraced and ignored by the mass media.

Like a tide that raises and lowers at different times, the visibility of the AIDS battle varies greatly, often losing sight of the people who are affected by the disease every day.

It is this anonymity that Snap Productions, an Omaha organization dedicated to education and support of AIDS-related programs, is trying to erase. Snap uses theatrical productions in an attempt to humanize the effects the AIDS virus has on American society. To further this cause, it is putting on a production entitled "Elegies for Angels, Punks and Raging Queens" that tries to capture those feelings.

"You kind of run the gamut of emotions with this show, rather than it just being like, 'Oh, it's a horrible, sad thing,'" said Michal Simpson, the artistic director for Snap. "It works really well because each character gets a chance to tell who they were and how they contracted the virus, so you really get insight into the disease."

The piece, written by Bill Russell with music by Janet Hood, is comprised of 32 monologues, each told by a different character who has died of AIDS. Throughout the monologues, four characters still living with AIDS contribute music to the story.

Snap president Roxanne Wach said it was the large cast size that enabled the piece to connect with a diverse audience.

"You have everybody from someone who had a one-night stand to a street person who's an intravenous drug user and a grandmother who had a blood transfusion," Wach said. "Because they're told in monologues that aren't very lengthy, it's not like an in-depth, gut-wrenching thing where you're going to walk out of the theater exhausted."

"They're touching for the moment, but the lingering sadness comes from the fact that you realize that AIDS is something that affects millions of people every day."

Wach said despite the limited exposure the audience has with each character, the piece in its entirety is able to make a very strong connection between the ideas presented on the stage and the people sitting in the audience.

"It makes people aware of the scope of the illness. It's not just a gay piece, it's not just a drug-user piece — it really addresses the myriad of people AIDS affects," she said. "In some ways, the show deals with the crisis of any terminal illness and any kind of loss. Though it is a very specific topic, it still addresses the grieving process."

Director Randy Stevens said that connection was what he hoped to achieve all along.

"You'll find a connection with at least one of the characters in the show, whether it's the drag queen or the grandmother," Stevens said. "That's the point of the piece — to show the toll that AIDS has taken — that it doesn't discriminate."

Despite the rather simple format of "Elegies for Angels, Punks and Raging Queens," Stevens said the importance of each individual monologue was so great that it was hard finding a cast that could meet the number of different demands presented by each character.

"It was very difficult trying to do a simple show with that many diverse people, and it came down to finding all the right actors to fit the roles," he said. "Once that was decided, it was great because the people I cast were really excited about the project, and I had a pretty clear picture in my head of who their character was. The first rehearsals were just one on one with me and the actor, so no one really had trouble grasping format. It was just a matter of doing it over and over."

Simpson said he and the other members of Snap were proud of the piece, and audiences so far have actively embraced the show.

"We saw it as a method of broadening people's concept of people with HIV," he said. "We just want to let people know that the fight is still going on."

PREVIEW

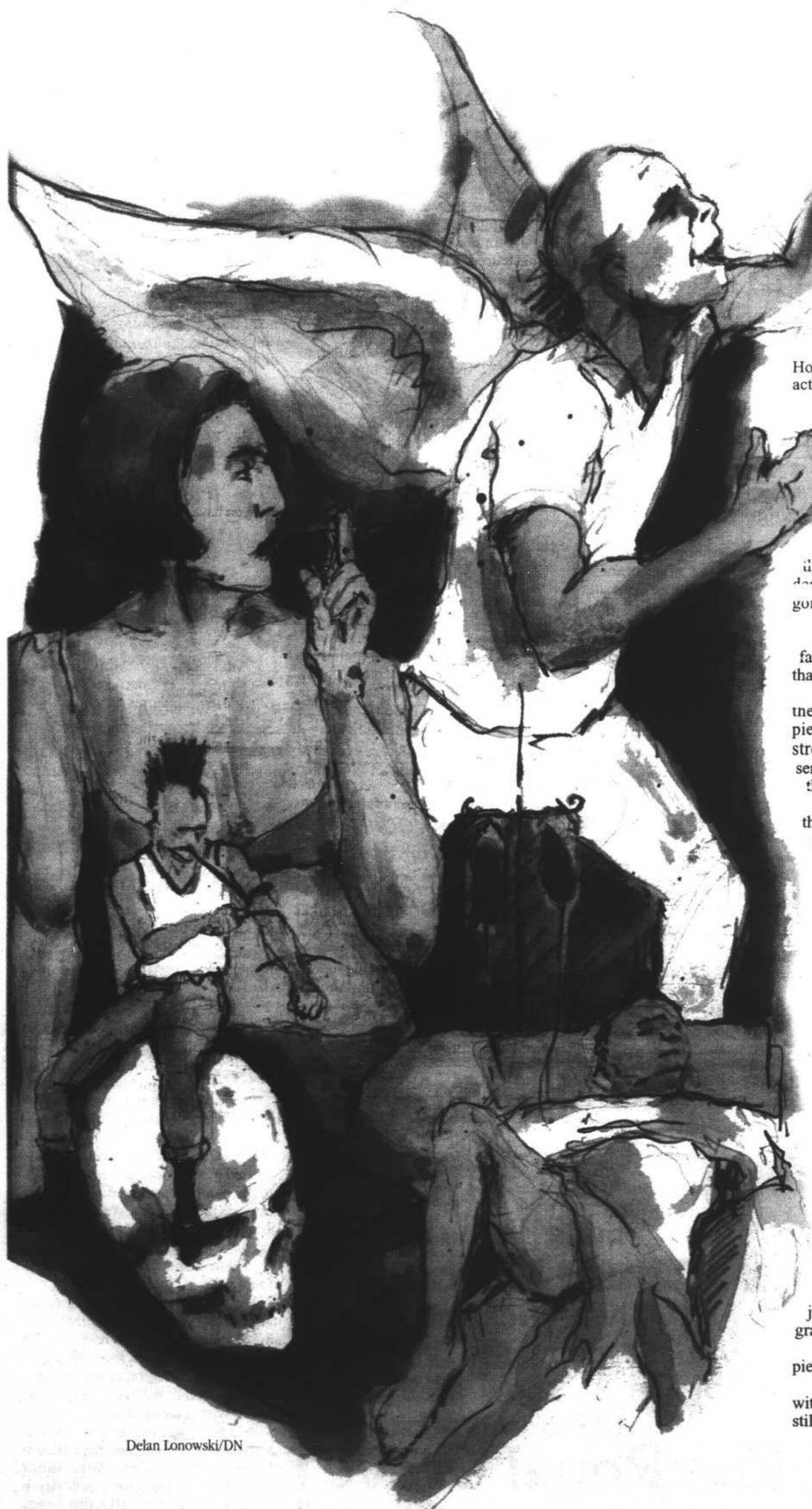
Elegies for Angels, Punks and Raging Queens

WHERE: Dundee Dinner Theatre, 5021 Underwood Ave., Omaha

WHEN: March 9 - 25

COST: Tickets: \$17.50, \$15.50 for students

THE SKINNY: Monologue show a tribute to AIDS victims.



Delan Lonowski/DN