Cellblock Tango

AT THE OUT OF THE LOOP FESTIVAL, THE UNSEEN STEALS THE SHOW
WHILE TRULL'S PERFORMANCE IN RUM AND VODKA STOPS THE SHOW;
FOOL FOR LOVE FLOPS ALL BY ITSELF

The Unseen must be seen. Wedged into a ragged repertoire of a dozen
dramas at WaterTower Theatre's
ten-year annual Out of the Loop Festi-
val, this 65-minute drama by Craig
Wright occupies the small studio space
more time on the feast's
finishing weekend. It could and
should reach a larger audience as a
breakout production that deserves a longer run.

In it, two political pris-
oners, victims of abuse by
a brutal and unnamed
regime, carry on wide-
ranging discourse between
their cells. They can hear
but not see each other (there
might or might not be another prisoner
between them), and as they edge closer to
madness, their talks burst with absurdist
trifles that echo Beckett and Kafka.

If that makes it sound wickedly bor-
ing, it's anything but. The Unseen is a short
but mighty masterpiece that
packs a searing emotional
wallop. The festival produc-
tion by the American
Actors Company (in
association with Baylor Un-
iversity) was directed by
Lisa Denman and features
sharp, focused work by
its three topnotch actors
(all Baylor drama profs).
Steven Pounders, Stan
Denman and Thomas
Ward smoothly navigate
Wright's raging torrent of words. Their
speeches show off the sort of vocal
dexterity we expect from classically trained
English stage actors and hear too rarely in
American ones.

For much of The Unseen, Pounders,
playing the prisoner named Wallace,
and Denman, as prisoner Mr. Valdez,
just talk. In their dimly lit quarters deep within a
vast penitentiary, they sit or lie on metal
cots, or stretch out on the hard floor as
they bicker back and forth. Punishing
their chats are the clangs and jarring elec-
tronic buzzes of steel doors opening and
closing in other wings.

To pass the time and stay mentally
alert—the men have sat in solitary for 11
years—Wallace and Valdez play elaborate
memory games full of images from sea
voyages to tropical climes. Between word
exercises they try to guess the identity
of their unidentified captors and sup-
pose whether an escape might be pos-
sible through mythical tunnels beneath
their cells. Both look for clues about the
outside world in bits of info gleaned from
interaction with their chief tormentor, a
ski-masked guard nicknamed "Smash"
(Ward). "Every great change in the world
begins with buttons," says the soft-spoken
Mr. Valdez, son of a seamstress.

Wallace becomes obsessed with unraveling
other mysteries, like the prison's confusing ar-
tecture. Is it beehive, coliseum or skyscraper?
He also decodes the patterns of buzzes on the
PA system. Any day now, he
believes, he and Mr. Val-

"Is this what you think about
when we're not talking?"

valdez will be free again.

This is what Dallas
actor Lee Trull is doing to
great effect in Irish play-
wright Conor McPherson's
one-man one-act
Rum and Vodka,
a

ing at WaterTower's ongoing Out of

Rum and Vodka. Trull has been gaining
momentum as an actor (he's also a playwright),
having starred in Kitchen Dog's Dust
Bowl saga End Times. More recently, he
planted a string of roles in WaterTower's
lovely Almost, Maine.

In Rum and Vodka, Trull rooks through the confusing
world of an overconfident
tale twenty-four-year-old husband who, in the
course of 72 hours, loses his job, cheats
on his wife, gets drunk 15 different ways,
awakes up in a pool of his own sick
and

Dandy's New Look

and Lost, which explains
his play's efficient pac-
ning and black humor. His
ideas are fresh and pro-
vocative. Themes of pol-
itical oppression and the
futility of torture could be
commentary on Abu
Ghraib or some Argen-
tine junta, though it all
seems a bit too close to
home. Or this play could
be interpreted as a more
intellectual Fight Club, all
rolling inside the mind of
a madman.

Only experienced
actors can carry off a
piece this deeply layered
and complex. Pounders,
Denman and Ward,
The Unseen's all-
Equity cast, are well-matched to the
project. They excel at that hardest of tasks in
live theater: Making mere words and
the sound of human voices capture the imagi-
nation and move an audience to tears.

Think acting is easy? Try this: Find 60
pages of prose, something with lots of
dialogue and long, descriptive phrases
written in the local slang of, say, a work-
ing-class neighborhood in Dublin, Ireland.
Now commit every word to
memory. No paraphrasing.
Every syllable exactly as the writer typed it.

"Got it in your head?" Now

...but not talking.

"No," answers Wallace, "this is what
I think about when you're talking."

Things change abruptly for the men,
but in a way that underscores the play-
wright's gift for surprising turns. Look
for the tortures, not Wallace or Valdez,
to crack under pressure. In a funny but
intensely disturbing speech, Smash
fantasizes about the perfect interrogation
device, the one that could cleanly extract
a prisoner's eyes and tongue, the better to
avoid painful gas and hideous screams.

What keeps The Unseen from devolving
into just another piece of downer agitprop
is Craig Wright's witty, well-constructed
script. He's a longtime TV writer for such
formula-busting series as Six Feet Under.