

SHORT EYES

at Coleman & Smith Artistic Company

Reviewed by T.H. McCulloh

On very rare occasions, film directors have rehearsed film scripts straight through, from beginning to end, before filming starts, instead of rehearsing the day's shots before shooting them. That's what this production of Miguel Piñero's tight, taut little drama looks like: a very good run-through just waiting for a sharp editor to clip out pauses between lines and shape it into a hard-hitting piece.

Piñero's major point is the incarceration in a house of detention of a child molester, Clark Davis, and the reactions of his fellow inmates when they find out the charges against him. "Short eyes," the prison slang for a molester, is the lowest form of life behind bars, and the inmates' passion to destroy Davis is the fulcrum of this award-winning script. The good-time aura of the inmates is the contrast that makes it dramatic and theatrical.

Director Tom Ardavany's filmic staging, however, leaves the plot out of balance. He magnifies the physical action to the detriment of the emotional power underlying

the dialogue, and his tempos are lethargic and uneven. Most of the evening is slow enough to stretch this into a three-hour performance, when it should be much shorter. If he had a camera in his hands he might make something of a character staring into space or at a form or photo, but onstage these moments are just terribly dull. When the tempos do pick up, it is only briefly to highlight a single moment, as in Ice's vivid description of masturbating in his cell while imagining Pamela Lee Anderson cavorting nude before him. Originally his image was Jane Fonda, but Ardavany has updated the script—also unnecessarily moving it from New York to Los Angeles. The piece is timely, no matter where it's set.

Looking beyond the inconclusive direction, the performances of the large cast are good, needing only more theatrical direction to make them shine, though most of the actors play their characters by the book. Josh Holloway's guard and his aide, played by Wes Hubbard, are simplistically nasty and sharp, and are effective in that narrow view. As Davis, John Cragen's sense of innocence within a very confused mind is very right, and Daniel Zacapa's ferocious attempt as Juan to understand Davis while still hating him is effective and honest. L. Sidney as the pseudo religious El Raheem, Garry G's volatile Omar, and Manny Gavino's sometimes explosive Paco are solid performances, Gavino particularly in the gratuitous shower scene as he attempts to rape the group's kid, played with vigor and humor by Xaypani Baccam. Lamont A. Coleman is one-note but effective as the prison official. Rashawn E. Vaughn as the outrageous Ice and Matt Gerald as the hot-blooded Longshoe stand out for their solid characterizations and potent understanding of their roles.

"Short Eyes," presented by and at Coleman & Smith Artistic Company, 6448 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood. Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 7 p.m. Feb. 21-Mar. 16. (323) 871-1888.