

ONE-ACT DRAMAS: '2 BY SOUTH'

By **FRANK RICH**

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IN his best movies, such as "M*A*S*H" and "Nashville," Robert Altman creates a sprawling, highly populated world that seems to spill right out of the frame. He does so by using overlapping dialogue, whirligig cutting and subjective camera movements - cinematic techniques that are often antithetical to those of the stage. Now, after 19 movies, Mr. Altman has turned to the theater, and, surprising as it sounds, he's made this unlikely transition with total ease. His staging of "2 by South," a pair of one-act dramas at St. Clement's, is impeccable in its concern for precise details and imaginative in its overall conception. You'd never guess that Mr. Altman hasn't given his life to directing plays.

Always a fan of fresh talent, the director here devotes his attention to a new playwright, Frank South. It isn't difficult to see why the writer appeals to him. Mr. South creates folksy, Middle American characters - then squeezes and squeezes them until they start to spurt blood. Like Mr. Altman, the playwright believes that darkness lurks behind every American dream. Though his people travel the open highway to chase country-and-western dreams of romance and frontier freedom, they can't, in the end, escape the unspeakable, random violence that's embedded deep in the national soul.

Both plays are essentially monologues. In the first, "Precious Blood," there are two speakers - a registered nurse and a smalltime kitchen-furnishings supplier. They each recount their homely autobiographies until finally their interstitched but separate pasts collide in a rape. "Rattlesnake in a Cooler" is a recollection by a young doctor who shucks his safe middle-class existence to become a cowboy out West; though he soon discovers that cowboys now drive Buicks, not horses, he nonetheless becomes, for better or worse, a true outlaw.

There are serious problems with both plays. Mr. South is all too clearly captivated by other writers - from Edgar Lee Masters, Twain and Faulkner to the Capote of "In Cold Blood" -and his fixations show up when his characters drop their colorful, regional voices for literary locutions. More crucially, the playwright has not figured out how to make his violent climaxes arise organically from his material. Though each play feels too long, some psychological and narrative synapses are missing - and the denouements seem contrived. We never believe that the likable characters we first meet are the same people as the violent creatures we're left with at the end.

Yet Mr. South clearly has talent. Just when he's trying our patience with his ellipses, talkiness and evasions, he'll provide an arresting turn of phrase or incident. We hear of a

man who has been "harvesting tobacco with one arm and a half-wit son for ten years," of a crazy woman whose "thumbs always looked frayed and thick," of cowboys who keep a rattlesnake on the dashboard "to keep their tapedeck from being robbed." What Mr. South now must do is create full-fledged plays that can accommodate such fine-honed observations.

Despite occasional projection problems, the actors are very good at establishing their own characters, as well as the others that enter their monologues. As the nurse in "Precious Blood," Alfre Woodard gives us the sad essence of a once-optimistic, now-withdrawn young woman who "lay (her) heart on the table and handed someone a hammer." Her lopsided-looking co-star, Guy Boyd, makes the most of his underwritten transition from grinning, cracker-barrel storyteller to cold-eyed monster. In the second play, Leo Burmester's cowboy lives up to the pun of the title: he is the rattlesnake in the cooler - angrily throwing himself against the walls of the mean room where his bankrupt fantasies have led.

It is Mr. Altman, however, who gives "2 by South" its most forceful moments. Working with two exceptionally gifted Los Angeles designers - John Kavelin (scenery) and Barbara Ling (lighting) - the director always combines realism with an abstract sense of space and mood. In "Blood," the two speakers constantly roam over four rooms to create their own but parallel dramas - regardless of whose turn it is to talk. When the pair's paths finally intersect, Mr. Altman achieves the powerful effect of keeping both players in their separate, isolated worlds even as they ostensibly interact. A similar device turns up in "Rattlesnake": as the cowboy listens to countryand-western songs on his radio, the singer (Danny Darst) appears in the flesh - a chilling, hallucinatory embodiment of the protagonist's phantom dreams.

If this director can do so well by Mr. South's unfinished vision of the American heartland, what might he do with that of a Lanford Wilson or Sam Shepard? Here's hoping that Mr. Altman won't go back to Hollywood before we find out. American Heartland 2 BY SOUTH, by Frank South; directed by Robert Altman; scenery by John Kavelin; lighting by Barbara Ling; production stage manager John Brigleb. Presented by M.G.I. and Scott Bushnell, in association with the Los Angeles Actors' Theater. At St. Clement's Theater, 423 West 46th Street. PRECIOUS BLOOD ActorGuy Boyd ActressAlfre Woodard and RATTLESNAKE IN A COOLER ActorLen Burmester MusicianDanny Darst