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'Prom' a fresh peek into teens' minds

BY DOMINIC P. PAPATOLA

Theater Critic

As a high school student, going to the prom twice can be fraught with peril, since the second experience — from the date to the dress to the desires — is bound to be compared to the first.

There's a similar anxiety for an audience member going to "Prom," the Children's Theatre Company's lightning-in-a-bottle meditation on the spring formal. Happily, much of what was familiar from the theater's 2004 production remains, but this new staging has an energy and freshness all its own.

That's largely due to its young cast members. When director Whit MacLaughlin first staged "Prom" a couple of years ago, he developed the material with a half-dozen or so adult cast members and a dozen teenagers. While many of the grown-ups have returned for this staging, it's a whole new group of teens, who bring with them a different set of enthusiasms, angsts, competencies and uncertainties.

The show depicts the prom as a full-contact sport, playing out on an athletic field. To a blaring soundtrack, the young formal-clads rush toward the end zone marked "Future" and the arrested-development chaperones toil in the backfield of the "Past." A referee oversees the competition, tossing the

penalty flag and calling the youngsters for such infractions as "busting a move while the night is still young."

That's the eye candy, but the most interesting stuff is happening in the minds of the young people, which bubbles to the surface in a variety of ways. The discoveries run from the superficial to the complex and from the straightforward to the paradoxical: The smooth-talking dude loses his cool when his clothes don't match. The green-haired bisexual wishes that she'd come with a girl. While her body spins away on the dance floor, a young woman's mind is already 500 miles away at college.

Rite of passage? More like a baptism of fire. But, as the principal says: "Change, if you consider it a constant, can be a comfort."

All of this trying-on and discarding of realities might cause palpitations for parents in the audience. But if the reactions of the teens in the house opening night were any gauge, it's at least refreshing for them to hear these things spoken aloud and in public. And at the most, it's cathartic.

For those long past their prom years, the show is a slick-looking, surreal piece of theater, one meant more to

be absorbed than understood moment by moment. MacLaughlin has smoothed out the piece — it's not so self-consciously hyperkinetic as the last time around and doesn't seem to be pressing quite so hard to be cool.

In an odd and maybe even accidental way, "Prom" bridges a fissure between the generations that has come to look more like a chasm. Maybe young and old don't communicate or get their news or listen to music in the same way anymore. But we all cross the bridge from childhood to adulthood. "Prom" is a stylish reminder that then, as now, everyone has to mind the gap.

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What: "Prom"

When: through March 19

Where: Cargill Stage, Children's Theatre Company, 2400 Third Ave, S., Minneapolis

Tickets: \$28, \$18 for teens; call: 612-874-0400

Capsule: The spring formal is examined through pop anthropology.