

'Altruists' funny, but not for faint of heart
Lab Theater production reveals do-gooders as self-centered hypocrites in this edgy comedy By Charles Runnells

Laboratory Theater skewers do-gooders and their less-than-selfless acts in its latest comedy, "The Altruists." And along the way, we get to spend time with the kind of white protestors who wear "Black Power" shirts and argue about who suffers more: black lesbians or Hispanic gays.

"The Altruists" is written by "Off-Broadway bad boy" Nicky Silver, and this viciously funny comedy more than lives up to that reputation with its barbed dialogue, outlandish characters, simulated sex (both the straight and gay varieties), partial male nudity and talk about one sexually skilled man having the "stamina of a 10-year-old."

This one isn't for the faint of heart, but it is very funny. Longtime local actor James Recca displays a keen eye for comedy and over-the-top characters in his second outing as a director (his first was last summer's "Bob: A Life in Five Acts"). And he's assembled an A-list community-theater cast to bring his vision to life.

"The Altruists" flits back and forth between three New York City apartments (designed by Dick and Joanne Steele) as a "merry band of rebels" prepares for an upcoming protest rally. Protesting what? Nobody seems to remember. But whatever it is, it requires fire bombs. Or was that stink bombs?

Lucy Harris hams it up as melodramatic, immensely shallow soap-opera star Sydney, who opens the play with an epic kiss-off speech to her live-in boyfriend Ethan, presumably the person passed out under a sheet on their bed. Eventually — about 10 minutes and several emotional breakdowns later — she makes sure Ethan understands the seriousness of the situation by firing three gunshots into his torso.

Goodbye, boyfriend.

Meanwhile, Sydney's needy brother Ronald just had the sex of his life with a man he met in a gay bar (a man who soon turns out to be a prostitute). Scott Carpenter's queeny, head-over-heels Ronald goes on and on about their mindblowing sex as he fondles Lance's pecs and excitedly asks him about his lover's weight and eye color. It's blue.

"Blue! Blue!" Ronald responds in rhapsodic tones with his hands clasped. "Oh, it's poetry! It's a song!"

Ronald is a social worker who's desperate for another fix-it project (he doesn't have a great track record, though: that little Ethiopian girl nearly bankrupted him for what started as "the price of a cup of coffee a day"). Lance appears to be the answer. But the ambivalent hustler — played with a druggy, anything-goes vibe by Joseph Yazvac — only answers with a distracted "Cool" and keeps asking if Ronald has any marijuana or coke.

"Look in the fridge," a clueless Ronald answers.

Then there's on-again, off-again lesbian Cybil, who at the moment is off again and sleeping with the sexually talented Ethan (not dead after all, and played by Val White with a British accent and a smart, Russell-Brand-like cool). Tera Nicole Miller's Cybil is butch and intense in her combat boots and work shirt, but her character can't always remember what she's being so intense story lines eventually converge over the mystery corpse in Sydney's posh apartment, and the results are funny and so sharp you just might cut yourself.

Lab Theater's comedy overstays its welcome a bit in its second act, but then it circles around for a vicious and memorable ending. When it comes down to "us and them," it turns out, these so-called do-gooders will pick "us" every time. Altruists? Hardly.

Hypocrites? You bet.