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A fertile "Oil" well has yet to be tapped

By John Moore
Denver Post Theater Critic
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Fort Collins - Gary Austin has the premise and the personal experience to one day create a sizzling stage satire about corruption in the oil industry from the knowing point of view of a kid who grew up in the Texas oil camps.

What he needs now is a director.

Austin, a founder of the legendary Groundlings improv comedy troupe, opened "Oil" in its world premiere last week at the Bas Bleu Theatre. The 75-minute piece is written, performed and directed by Austin - which is one too many hats.

Austin has the skeleton for some potentially strong theater, but in its present form, "Oil" lacks continuity, effective transitions, pace, a structural arc and an overall sense of dramatic purpose. It's part nostalgic memory play, part multiple-character study, part Western hootenanny and part anti-Bush agitprop. All of which is fine, but in its present form, this is crude "Oil." And it all ends so quickly, you don't really know just what you were meant to have gotten out of it.

An experienced stage director could help Austin organize, edit, build and fully tap his promising material to a more potent stage effect.

"Oil" opened last week with respected Los Angeles acoustic guitarist Matt Cartsonis singing scene-setting traditionals such as Woody Guthrie's "Oklahoma Hills," then remaining onstage for live underscoring. For the remainder of the run, however, Austin will perform only to Cartsonis' recorded songs.

"Oil" opens as a gentle look at Austin's Gulf Coast youth. Austin plays every role, interacting with his prototypically stern 1950s dad (a career Halliburton employee) and his mother, who grew up near the nation's largest oil field in Oilton, Okla. We meet many others, including co-workers and a Baptist preacher who turned an Oilton brothel into a hospital.

The piece turns on a dime - and not a minute too soon - when Austin fast-forwards and launches some compelling Michael Moore-worthy charges against Halliburton, George W. Bush and his administration.

The piece turns funny when Austin takes us to the real-life Petroleum Hall of Fame. With the adults off taking a tour, Austin entertains "the children" (meaning those of us in the audience) with a witty story about a boy who just kept on failing but never gave up. Guess who?

Austin parodies "The Little Engine That Could" in detailing how Bush got only progressively richer with each succeeding failure as an oil businessman. His inference is that oil execs routinely overpaid Bush for his failing businesses (in one case \$1 million for shares assessed at \$38,000) as a way of ingratiating themselves with his president father.

At these moments, "Oil" has real political pulse. At its best, "Oil" is a sharp exposé of the industry's environmental impact and the corruption it breeds.

But last weekend, Austin was almost painfully underprepared, frequently stumbling over his own words and awkwardly correcting himself whenever he became confused.

Austin is a legend in the field of improvisation - a man whose students and alumni have included Will Ferrell, Lisa Kudrow and Phil Hartman. But he's not at all yet comfortable performing in a theater setting, which makes us uncomfortable watching him.

As a result, not much in "Oil" comes across as all that funny, though it's hard to gauge funny when the performer looks caught in the headlights.

Perhaps it was a matter of fatigue: Austin had conducted a five-hour workshop for Bas Bleu before Saturday's show. But as of now, Austin's ideas are far more ready for their debut than Austin is.

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"Oil"

COMIC MONOLOGUE|Bas Bleu Theatre Company, 401 Pine St., Fort Collins| Written and performed by Groundlings co-founder Gary Austin|THROUGH SEPT. 3|7:30 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2:30 p.m. Sundays|75 minutes, with post-show entertainment|\$10-\$19|970-498-8949; basbleu.org