

Wednesday August 24th, 2005



Blood Is Thicker Than Oil

By Andra Coberly

The truth is Oil's Gary Austin, at times, starts to seem like the stage version of some future Michael Moore documentary.

His mid-show monologue—a "once upon a time" tale of George Dubya's oil-fueled rise to power—is a full tank of fun facts about Texas oil companies and their financial influence on the politicians who run the world.

But before you meet Austin The Left Wing Activist, you meet Austin The Little Boy, Austin The Conservative Oil Tycoon, Austin The Gusher-Watching Reporter.

The creator of Los Angeles' famed improvisational outfit The Groundlings and acting coach for Hollywood stars such as Helen Hunt and Lisa Kudrow, Austin takes on a schizophrenic amount of characters in his new one-man play having its regional premiere at the Bas Bleu Theatre through Sept. 3. In a blink of an eye, he switches from mother to father, from Baptist minister to madam, from teenage self to current self during the two-hour performance.

Austin weaves together his multiple personalities along with songs like "Cost Plus" and "Chicken Fried Steak" with humor and efficiency, though not always smoothly or without pause. Oil, despite being a rhetorical analysis of the resources' impact on Austin's personal life as well as its political and environmental vigor, has a new brand of humor—a blend of ironical humor-noir and it's-funny-cause-it's-true sarcasm—fueled by Austin's physical prowess, intelligent writing and quirky songs.

While he is never short on opinions about power-hungry oilmen and politicians and concerns about oil mining's impact on the environment, Austin's show is not purely a political rant. Rather, the play has brains and heart.

Before you think the actor a left-wing radical with his target set on Dubya and his cohorts, you should meet the boy raised to respect this black gold and the father who not only teaches his son the ways of the oil business, but espouses advice on girls, peeing in soda bottles, the EPA and Dick Cheney—"God bless him."

Austin was that "Halliburton kid," growing up in the company's oil camps in Texas.

With eyes wide and jaw hanging, the gray-haired actor reverts into his childhood posture, voice and innocence. He takes a big gulp and begins to talk about his father, a Halliburton employee married to a woman who was born in Oilton, Okla., at the time, the world's largest oil field.

Austin, at his best, is his own father. At first, it appears that he is acting out some repressed bitterness for his stern, oil-loving dad—probably more for the oil-loving part than the sternness. God help the parents of the kid who learned to write a joke and found an audience to tell it to.

But as the play continues, the elder Austin becomes one of those good

ol' boys who you love to hate, someone who got lost deep in oil country and never thought to look for a way out.

In a post-mortem speech—Austin's father died just before Sept. 11, 2001, and the current political state that mixes power and oil into a mighty strong cocktail— he skillfully prophesizes on hydraulic fracturing's alleged effects on the environment. Austin shines, finding a natural fit in the black-stained boots of his pop.

The candid portrayal of his own blood gives the play's political message a gallon of his own heart and history, something that's lacking from the Fahrenheit 911s of today.

The actor brings us in with his narratives, his story and his characters, and then he leaves us with his message, but like many a Michael Moore film, Austin also has no solutions. He is simply an entertainer with a message.

So where many pundits pump their political agendas, with fingers pointing and nostrils flared, like gasoline from the hose, Austin is still that little boy, that Halliburton kid, growing up in the Texas sandbox.

Gary Austin's Oil

Through Saturday, Sept. 3.

Bas Bleu Theatre

401 Pine Street

Thursday-Saturday, 7:30 p.m.; Sunday 2 p.m.

\$19, \$15 seniors, \$10 students

498-8949