

Beautiful City

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By Jeff Favre

Crime lords, architects, and witches abound in the unnamed, ever-growing Canadian city of George F. Walker's fertile mind. The quirky personalities should make a compelling story, but the pieces don't quite fit. With a weak cast and Martha Demson's often sloppy direction, *Beautiful City* fluctuates between charmingly funny and dull—with much more of the latter.

Matters aren't helped by an entirely flat first scene. That's when architect Paul Gallagher (Rob Nagle), apparently violently ill, is being forced by businessman Tony Raft (Michael Patrick McGill) to render an opinion on a model of a home. Paul winds up in the hospital, where he meets a nurse (Kappa Victoria Wood) whose mother, Gina (Hepburn Jamieson), is a witch who may be able to cure him. Meanwhile, Tony and his mother, Mary (Nicola Hersh), turn out to be mobsters who are given faulty information that Gina and Paul are stealing from them. Things get odder and much funnier in the second act, as witchcraft, kidnapping, and explosions take center stage.

Pacing and performances sink most of the first half. Demson misses chances to pump up the humor, and the occasional comic moments are short-circuited by lengthy pauses and clunky blocking. Also, McGill lacks the ferocity to make mobster Tony interesting. Hersh, though intimidating in stature, is stiff and unbelievable as big boss Mary. And Jamieson seems unsure how to portray the mystical, angry Gina. Only Nagle, as Paul, is compelling. He gives an honest portrayal of an insecure, unhappy man trying to change his life. In scenes that center on Paul, Walker's dialogue frequently sparkles, and Nagle makes them memorable. But, for the most part, the script is a sermon on the evils of overexpansion of big cities and how it breeds isolation. And that message isn't conveyed in an interesting enough way to warrant its two-hour exploration.

Presented by and at the Open Fist Theatre, 6209 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood. Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 7 p.m. (Dark Dec. 19-Jan. 4.) Dec. 15-Feb. 3. (323) 882-6912. www.openfist.org.