



From Sea to Shining CEO: Sam Gregory tries to steer startup Gizmo to profitability.

## They're No Angels

Venture capitalists get skewered in SJ Rep's world premiere 'Ctrl+Alt+Delete'

By Heather Zimmerman

YOU'RE NOT in high tech, you're in showbiz," a venture capital salesman explains to a high-tech entrepreneur, and thus, playwright Anthony Clarvoe sums up his satire *Ctrl+Alt+Delete*. In the play's world premiere, presented by the San Jose Repertory Theatre, Clarvoe gives the audience a wry look into the world of venture capitalists, who were

sometimes known as "angels," because they funded (and overvalued) so many tech startups. Clarvoe makes two points clear: in the new economy, technology had little to do with anything, and VCs were no angels.

The play begins in 1998. Naive entrepreneur Eddie Fisker (Patrick Darragh) seeks the backing of the powerful Prospera Fund to launch the Gizmo, a wireless product. To his surprise, he easily wins the support of Gus Belmont (James Carpenter), the eccentric head of Prospera. Suddenly, Fisker's got himself a startup complete with a bitter business veteran CEO (Sam Gregory), and a salesman, Tom Xerox (Rob Nagle), of the Xerox family, who simply loves the job. Also on board is Marie (Betsy Brandt), whose good looks seem to explain her role as Belmont's personal assistant. As the funding comes pouring in, the startup has everything ... except a plan to start manufacturing Gizmos.

The play takes a while to get up to speed. The first 20 minutes are like sitting in on a meeting of venture capitalists, which reveals that the brains behind the money, initially, aren't that interesting. However, their machinations slowly draw us in. Clarvoe also makes clever use of a financial reporter (Jennifer Kato) both to explain the more arcane business terms and to spoof the media hype that helped fuel the dotcom boom and bust. Some of the performances also take a while to hit their stride but are worth the wait. In particular, Darragh isn't quite as believable as the young naif so much as when that naif begins to think he's realizing his dream. Brandt is thoroughly excellent as the only element of the venture

who's actually undervalued, and Carpenter's charismatic Belmont could just as easily lead a religious cult as an investment firm.

Director Ethan McSweeney shows an exuberant sense of humor, giving Clarvoe's hilarious one-liners all their due. But most humorously of all, the packaging of the play perfectly mirrors the marketing strategies of the boom years. Although Clarvoe puts a human--and not necessarily a likable--face on a time that seemed to be all about virtual products, and, it turns out, virtual profits, *Ctrl+Alt+Delete* doesn't offer much comment on the human condition that created such conditions so much as it simply offers a modern farce, having a really good time at the expense of a ridiculous, frivolous, decadent era that was fun enough while it lasted.

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**Ctrl+Alt+Delete** plays Tuesday-Friday at 8pm, Saturday at 3 and 8pm, Sunday at 2 and 7pm through Nov. 18 at the San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. Tickets are \$20-\$44. 408.367.7255.

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