

LAWEEKLY



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Rob Nagle and Cody Kearsley

COYOTE ON A FENCE: Solid performances by Rob Nagle and Cody Kearsley as death-row inmates in side-by-side cells distinguish Theatre Arts' production of Bruce Graham's 2000 social-issue drama. College-educated John Brennan (Nagle, in a contemplative and wise performance) edits the prison newspaper and writes eloquent obituaries for the men being executed in their Alabama penitentiary with alarming frequency and considerable public outcry. Brennan's statements in a BBC documentary have gotten him in trouble with prison management but also have drawn the attention of slightly condescending N.Y. Times journalist Sam Fried (Benjamin Cooper Mathes), who finds Brennan's eulogies to be simplistic and romantic. Fried is also Jewish, which explains his antipathy for the young man in Brennan's adjoining cell -- a zealous anti-Semite and unapologetic member of the Aryan brotherhood (Kearsley, in a wonderfully childlike performance), who believes he's heading directly into the arms of God after killing 37 blacks in a church bombing. The play recycles eternal questions of evil and forgiveness, but James Warwick stages Graham's absorbing if dramaturgically crude drama with keen sensitivity and nuance. Shawna DuChamps nicely portrays prison guard Lisa Valenzuela, though her monologues to an unseen reporter are packed with platitudes. Also, Brennan reads us letters he's already written. Even an actor as fine as Nagle can't give that device credence. (Steven Leigh Morris). Sundays, 4 & 7 p.m.; Sat., Sept. 14, 5 & 8 p.m. Continues through Sept. 15. Arena Stage at Theater of Arts, 1625 N. Las Palmas Ave., Los Angeles.