

Darker natures are awakened

Christine (Melanie Hawkins) squats in the middle of the floor, her face lighted by only the flashlight she holds, crunching ice cubes with every sign of gustatory pleasure. Quivering with excitement and apparent dread, she plunges her hand into a bowl of icy water for unendurable periods.

So begins "Eighteen," Allison Moore's play, a Meadows Basement Theater production, about a bereft and self-loathing teen whose efforts to maintain a perfect outward facade come at a high cost. Christine, whose mother has just died and whose father is in Venezuela on an engineering project, comes to stay with her Uncle Dan (Rob Nagle) and his wife, Marie (Jennifer Bledsoe), while she completes her senior year of high school. An affluent couple whose marriage is apparently blissful, Dan and Marie relate to one another primarily through food (Marie is a gourmet cook) and sex. However, Christine's arrival awakens appetites of a darker nature.

Around a been-there, done-that story line of "Come Back, Little Sheba" vintage, Moore has woven a tale of subterranean despair threaded with the unexpected. Granted, the play sometimes seems more underdeveloped than intentionally cryptic, but director Jay Dysart largely compensates for that deficit in a taut staging.

The bombastic Nagle and the effectively reserved Bledsoe are excellent, but it is the precocious Hawkins whose intensity staggers us. She is unqualifiedly splendid, a young actor whose career bears watching.

-- F. Kathleen Foley

"Eighteen," Dorie Theatre at the Complex, 6476 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood. Fridays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 2 p.m. Ends Dec. 16. \$15. (323) 782-6218. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes.