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God Bless Adrian, Michigan

By Adam Langer

GOD BLESS ADRIAN, MICHIGAN

Still Hunt Theatre Company

at the Chicago Actors Ensemble

For the aging young toughs of Adrian, Michigan, it's almost as if high school never ended. With their droopy mustaches and ripped concert T-shirts the town hellions still cruise the local malls and party in their parents' basements to Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath. Frustrated with their nowhere lives, they spend weekend nights looking for fights--it ain't a party till something gets broken and someone passes out on the floor. Despite the responsibilities they have now--there are bills to be paid and jobs to be done--Fish is still eternally stoned, and the brooding, murderous Horn fights, pounds beer, and argues with the hapless Harv and the musclebound, childish Dirk.

Once the kings of the high school cafeteria, they're now the veritable dregs of their town, their dreams used up like so much reefer, leaving only the bong water of discontent. Bad boys in the bodies of men, they are trapped in violent adolescent rituals, wasting away in this miserable Anytown.

In Christopher Hickman's *God Bless Adrian, Michigan* two refugees from Adrian--Martin and Joanne--return home and go to a party in Fish's basement, where they revert to the same destructive patterns they thought they'd left behind. The nouveau intellectual theater student Martin eyes the horseplay and drinking games of his old buddies with a self-satisfied smile. Joanne boasts of her Stanislavsky training and how different she's become while her friends Karyn and Renee still hang out with the same crew of hooligans. As the play progresses, however, the erudite Martin reveals himself to be an impotent hypocrite, unable to do anything but smugly pontificate as the party turns violent. And the self-possessed Joanne drinks to excess, unaware of an ugly plot one of the men has hatched to gang rape her.

Hickman paints a grim but startlingly accurate picture of middle America in a Still Hunt Theatre Company production he also directs. The burned-out men of Adrian are eerily real. Rob Nagle's bull-like Dirk and Dennis McNitt's self-effacing, simpering Harv are both frightening and pathetic. Daniel Harray, oozing his way across the stage as the devilish Horn, gives an electrifying performance, inspiring shivers with a single beer-soaked syllable or terrifying glance. Tom Lynch is so hilariously on target as the air-guitar-playing, rock-magazine-reading Fish that his performance begs a urine test. As the drunken party girl Joanne, Heather Brooks convincingly juxtaposes self-assurance

and desperation.

Where Hickman falters is in the character of Martin, who is far too uninteresting to be the focus of the play. Hickman uses Martin as a mouthpiece for some rather unoriginal ideas about the underpinnings of male aggression, which come off as obvious and forced. We never really understand why Martin once hung out with this group or why he chose to return, other than some vague wish to prove himself or close the book on his past, which is not enough to carry the action of the play. The men's reactions to him seem phony and overdone: "So you still do that theater stuff? Plays and shit?" It's difficult to tell whether Hickman's making fun of Martin's pretensions or if the character is autobiographical and it's the author who's pretentious. He's such a self-important schmuck that you wouldn't mind if Harv and Dirk and Horn kicked his ass during his King Lear soliloquy.

Despite some excellent dialogue and some cleverly written characters, the play lacks a strong focus and so feels long and overwritten. The characters of Renee and Karyn do little more than reveal some of the unpleasantness of the men, get pissed off, and leave. There are some logistical problems as well. Michael Laphorn has provided the perfect seedy basement, but director Hickman seems to have ignored its invisible walls. In one scene Martin is shoved against a wall that, moments later, other actors walk through. And it's not acceptable to have actors who are not the focus of scenes pantomime dialogue and other business as if that explained why they're ignoring the main action.

What Hickman needs to do is pare down his play--tighten it up, because large sections of it feel aimless. He has a great core of characters, and others that need to be developed or eliminated. That done, God Bless Adrian, Michigan could become a gripping piece of theater. Right now it's only halfway there.