

'Ctrl+Alt+Delete' a robotic satire of high-tech boom

Steven Winn, Chronicle Theater Critic Published 4:00 am, Monday, October 29, 2001

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James Carpenter, as Gus Belmont, practices his opening monologue from the new play Ctrl+Alt+Delete at a rehearsal on Friday evening at the San Jose Repertory Theatre. Photo by Jeff Chiu / The Chronicle.



CTRL+ALT+DELETE: Comedy. By **Anthony Clarvoe**. Directed by **Ethan McSweeney**. (Through Nov. 18. At the **San Jose Repertory Theatre**, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. 2 hours, 25 minutes. Tickets: \$20-\$44. Call (408) 367-7255 or visit www.sjrep.com).

Knowing laughter rang out in the San Jose Repertory Theatre at Friday's world premiere of "Ctrl+Alt+Delete." Anthony Clarvoe's attentive but mechanical comedy taps a millennial moment in time -- the giddy bubble of super-hot startups, venture capital bonanzas, guru fund managers and a Nasdaq soaring above 4,000 -- that a Silicon Valley audience recognizes only too well now that it's gone.

Clarvoe, author of the precocious computer play "Pick Up Ax" in the late 1980s, sends his characters into the high-tech ozone here. They're functions of the

artificial hopes and paranoid greed the boom, c. 1998-2000, created.

"We're selling potential," declares the messianic money man **Gus Belmont (James Carpenter)** of the **Prospera Fund**. In this case, it's spurred by a wireless connectivity gadget (the "Gizmo") offered by an eager-beaver entrepreneur (**Patrick Darragh**). The idea gets fed to a voracious market that bids up innovations wildly out of scale with their real value.

The action takes place, on **Todd Rosenthal**'s slick blank set, in a placeless corporate realm of cell phone calls, anonymous conference rooms, airport lounges and hotels. A cynical strategist, a supersalesman and a TV financial reporter fan the speculative flames with their new-economy dialogue about paradigms, selling short and feedback loops.

Once the buzz of recognition fades, unfortunately, this bluntly labeled play proves to be as much of a phantom as the world it describes. "Ctrl+Alt+Delete" tells us what we expect or already know about its six characters and their illusory world, then tells us all again and again. The subject cries out for the slyer plotting and more subversive sensibility a **David Mamet** might bring to the table.

Clarvoe settles for one-dimensional characters, idle metaphors (the Muppets, "The Wizard of Oz") and self-evident wisdom. "We're a casino," a member of the Prospera Fund team proclaims in a second-act speech, going on to pronounce the Gizmo a "Ponzi scheme" and to conclude that "morale is for suckers."

The best sales job of the night is pulled off by **Sam Gregory**, who speaks those lines with manic conviction. In a show-stealing turn as a tarnished golden boy whose startup got "cratered" and is now stuck toiling in the trenches for Belmont, Gregory's Carbury Grendall is the most fascinating character on display.

He's as ruthless about himself as he is about the truth behind the escalating ticker. When Gregory bellows into a phone about his squandered dreams, he captures the lunatic aspirations of the instantly self-entitled. A moon-faced **Rob Nagle** gets runner-up honors as **Tom Xerox**, who's in flight from his famous corporate family and in search of another home.

Director Ethan McSweeney elicits some lively performances, even when his staging, walled in by the set's sliding translucent panels, gets sluggish. Darragh gives off the nervous energy of blind ambition. His relationship with the show's mystery woman (**Betsy Brandt**), however, is a nonstarter. Carpenter never finds the morose magnetism for Belmont, the ailing titan. **Jennifer Kato** is stuck in the cliched role of a chattering reporter-narrator.

"Ctrl+Alt+Delete" holds a rueful mirror up to its unnatural economic age. Gregory's masochistic glee is the sharpest image we take away from the show's blipping screen.