

Fine acting is remedy for this therapy session

By Sandy MacDonald

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

WATERTOWN — Will Eno is one of those playwrights who will not let you forget for one second that, whatever else may be happening on-stage, he's there front and center, *writing*.

Not only does "The Flu Season," a 2004 work that Whistler in the Dark Theatre is introducing to Boston, feature a budding playwright as a main character, but it's also narrated by two figures labeled Prologue and Epilogue, so Eno need not miss a single opportunity to interrupt the action and provide auto-referential disquisitions on the creative process.

Is this constant commentary meant to be a clever distancing device, or is it merely a symptom of authorial self-indulgence? Either way it can be a very irritating tic, and only the very good offices of this young company save the playwright from himself in the current production at the Arsenal Center for the Arts.

It falls to Prologue (Ed Hoopman, whose buttery bass timbre is in a league with Will LeBow's) to embody the optimist's outlook on the scenes about to unfurl. Not

The Flu Season

Play by Will Eno

Directed by: Ben Fainstein.

Lights, Andrew Dickey. Costumes, Ginny Yang. Produced by Whistler in the Dark Theatre.

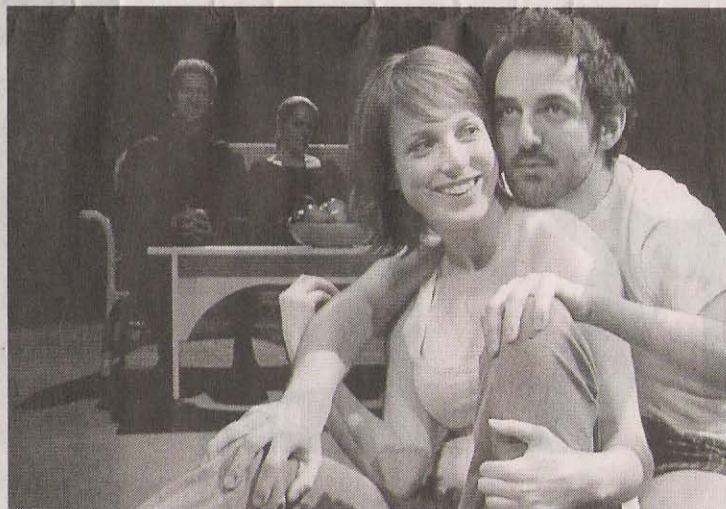
At: Black Box Theatre, Arsenal Center for the Arts, through May 5.

Tickets: \$25. 617-923-8487, whistlerinthedark.com

waiting for the outcome, Epilogue (a wonderfully astringent Jennifer O'Connor) immediately butts in with a more dour, perhaps more realistic take.

The core of the story is the attachment that forms between two patients at a psychiatric hospital. Aggressive, unpredictable Man (Nael Nacer), the nascent writer, is clearly more disturbed than Woman (Meghan Nesmith), who seems to have stalled out in a state of depression — or perhaps existential futility. It's difficult to determine exactly what's up with these two, because in time-honored absurdist tradition, their therapists, Doctor (David LeBahn) and Nurse (Shelley Brown), spend every session nattering on about their own neuroses.

These segments, and the pa-



The optimistic Prologue (Ed Hoopman) and the astringent Epilogue (Jennifer O'Connor) serve as the play's narrators.

tients' awkward, tentative steps toward mutual seduction, contain enough lovely off-the-wall poetry to warrant the self-congratulatory asides of Eno, author of the 2005 critics' darling "Thom Pain (based on nothing)." Here he leaves you feeling like a rube for falling for the continually disrupted realism — but fall you do, and at least you have company in the heart-on-his-sleeve Prologue, who's reduced to tears by this tale of love gone sour.

Man, for no perceptible reason, goes all Hamlet on Woman, spurning her cruelly once they've grown close. Nesmith invests such subtle pathos in her role that she makes you feel she's the first person in the world to undergo such heart-rend-

ing disillusionment.

It's a difficult play to pull off, but Whistler in the Dark — a year-old company with Middlebury College roots — does a splendid job in the barest of black-box spaces. In his director's note, Ben Fainstein alludes to his affinity for "dramatists who bear the label 'wordsmiths'" — a title that Eno would clearly embrace.

Just one pesky question, though: Eno never lets us lose sight of his observer self, fingers poised over the page as if every passing thought deserved documentation. Wouldn't a writer truly in love with words want to stop noodling incessantly and just trust the words to speak for themselves?