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THEATER

Please Kilt Me

A terrific Scottish punk-rock musical

BY TREY GRAHAM

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Rooms

**Music and Lyrics by Paul Scott Goodman;
Book by Goodman and Miriam Gordon;
Directed by Scott Schwartz**
At MetroStage to Sept. 7

"Bring the future faster," yowls the antsy young Glaswegian in the short skirt and the knee-high oxblood boots and the blazing blue-white spotlight, and damn if you don't want, in that moment, to hand the future to her—along with the gig, the agent, the contract, the fame, the fortune, the lover, the heartbreak, the life she's so avidly chasing.

Rooms is that kind of show, y'see—a speedy, scrappy new rock musical about wannabe rock musicians, all drive and neurosis, noise and naked ambition. And if the demonstrative covey of New York producers a-cooing and a-kissing at MetroStage last Sunday can be relied upon, this chamber-sized Renthead-chaser might earn itself as meteoric a rise—maybe even as happy an ending—as its lyricist-lead singer heroine does.

She's Monica P. Miller, a hungry young smarty with a looming bat mitzvah gig at the Morris Feldstein Memorial Ballroom and Banqueting Suite—and with her eyes firmly fixed on bigger things, preferably in London. With her act short one songwriting partner (her usual collaborator has decamped to Leeds), she's arrived in the darkened bedroom of one Ian Wallace, a gloomy, boozy blue-collar kid with a mild-to-moderate case of misanthropy and a blazing way with a guitar—and she's not taking his ambivalent "whatevers" for an answer.

Actually, come to think of it, I've started at the beginning, which the show doesn't: Rooms is one of those stories that opens in the characters' present-day, when everything's gone sour, and then flashes back to the 1977 meet-cute I've just described. The narrative thrust, as you'll know if you've seen Citizen Kane or even The Usual Suspects, is about getting back to that early-'80s opening moment—in this case via a Glasgow talent contest, a bus ride to London's punk underground, a record deal, and a transatlantic flight to CBGB's, all in quick succession—and finding out how that opening scene will play out.

So how will it play out? Monica's alone in New York, Ian's turned up after years of absence: Two guesses, and one doesn't count. It's predictable, sure, but Rooms is somehow entertaining anyway, not least because there's real snap to the libretto, by the husband-and-wife team of Paul Scott Goodman and Miriam Gordon, and to Goodman's bitingly wise-ass songs.

And because director Scott Schwartz keeps things moving briskly: The evening clocks in at maybe 90 minutes. There's a compressed energy in everything that happens—even the brooding, and the alcoholism, and the eventual 12-step sequence, all of which Doug Kreeger somehow makes winning. (Ian's a cookie-cutter tormented-artist type, except that Kreeger's sulky charisma and the Gordon-Goodman wordplay make him more or less irresistible.)

Nataschia Diaz makes a fine, bright foil for his petulant darkness, scribing out a surprisingly believable arc from Monica's anarchic, agitated teens to a bruised and consequently softer young adulthood—no easy task, given the frenetically jittery character that's on the page in the early going

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Beyond Saltire: Monica and Ian move south, then on up.

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propulsive "Bring the Future Faster," in which Monica's burning ambition gets fanned by the flutters of her first encounter with the gifted, good-looking Ian; the cheerfully South Park-y "Scottish Jewish Princess," in which the newly formed duo cock snark (and a bit too much truth) at that bat mitzvah's guest of honor; the tasty punk parody of "All I Want Is Everything," once the twosome has moved to London and become the safety-pinned, pogo-happy duo the Diabolicals—they're credible, angular, attitudinal, smart-as-a-whip songs, which to anyone who's seen anything aspiring to be a youth-targeted rock musical in the last few years, might be the most startling thing to happen in a local theater since that cast-party incident involving the vodka bottle and the pantsless leading man. Oh, and yeah, the power ballads—and that five-piece band flailing away up there on the catwalks—are fun, too.

I should say, lest you think I've been driven 'round the bend by my recent adventures among the mat-headed Fringe-going masses, that Rooms isn't quite a sensation—not this first time out of the gate, anyway. Those not-sucky songs include at least one that begins to sound overly familiar, in that insistent Lloyd Webberish way, before the evening's done—an excusable gimmick in a full-length musical with a cast album to sell, but a little lazy in a one-act, where even a single reprise comes of necessity at the expense of something else. And the show is maybe a tiny bit pleased with its own cleverness, which will be deadly if the next director isn't as good as Schwartz has been at getting his actors to trip lightly past those passages.

But I went into MetroStage on four hours of sleep last Sunday, and I came out raring for a post-show adventure involving a few friends and a few more cocktails, and I woke up the next morning not with a hangover but with "Bring the Future Faster" thumping its knee-high platform heel in my head. Which, y'know: Imperfections be damned, any show that leaves a critic ready to take a healthy bite out of a Monday morning deserves a lusty hurrah.

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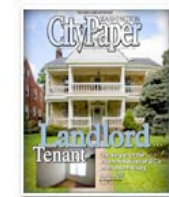
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