

2016 Philadelphia Fringe Festival Review: 'Then Athena' at Allentown Public Theatre

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Then Athena, a collective creation, directed by Troy Dwyer, and presented by Allentown Public Theatre, presents a tapestry of stories about a wide range of women, both fictional and historical. The Louis Bluver Theatre at the Drake, sparsely decorated with four theater blocks, folding chairs, a projector screen, and a collection of red-painted guns from various eras, plays host to a kaleidoscope of scenes featuring a villain from Wonder Woman, a squadron of soldiers in an Afghani minefield, a cross-dressing soldier in the Revolutionary War, and a number of women that you might find in any small town (though not necessarily in average situations). The scenes are not narratively connected, but they flow rapidly, sometimes overlapping each other.

The four creators deliver compelling performances throughout, each managing to find moments where they individually shine brightest. This is as much a testament to the acting as it is the script. Too often devised theater suffers from weak texts, but *Then Athena* features text that is at once poetic and natural, which gives the women multiple meaty characters to portray with aplomb.

Base costumes cast the actors as modern soldiers, and one or two simple additions per scene help create distinct characters visually. The lighting, designed by Randall Doyle, serves to separate scenes and create atmospheres, mostly staying out of the way of the performances.

The play is strongest when it allows its performers to act with each other or soliloquize. It weakens when the play becomes self-referential and makes its themes explicit – useful to remind the audience of the “so what?” of the piece but at the cost of potentially reducing an open-ended question to a slogan. Spelling “the point” out (as is a tool of didactic theater) means I can wrap the project in a little bow instead of grappling and struggling and finding my own conclusions. Of course, a boxed message does not *force* me to stop debating the show, but it makes it far easier.

Overall, *Then Athena* proves that women need to be given opportunities to tell their own stories – if not for any socially-responsible reason, then at least because talented women playing complex women makes for engrossing theater.

Running Time: 90 minutes, no intermission.

Then Athena played September 9-11, 2016 at The 2016 Philadelphia Fringe Festival performing at The Louis Bluver Theatre at the Drake in Philadelphia, PA. For more information on Allentown Public Theatre, go to their [website](#).

RATING: ★★★★★

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