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American Muscle

nytheatre.com review

Michael Criscuolo · August 12, 2006

American Muscle, a new solo show written and performed by Richard Thompkins, juxtaposes the story of maverick U.S. automaker John DeLorean with that of auto mechanic and backwoods drag racer Rick Thompkins, the author's father. What's the connection? The 1964 Pontiac GTO, described as "the first ever Muscle Car": DeLorean designed it when he was Pontiac's head engineer—a move which accelerated his ascent to the top of corporate auto culture; Thompkins Sr. raced a specially modified version of the GTO that made him virtually unbeatable on the blacktop. Clocking in at just under half an hour, *American Muscle* strives to pay homage to a lost era in American automaking, idealism, and masculinity by siding DeLorean's dream-big glamour next to Thompkins Sr.'s homespun wisdom. Based on the evidence of its current FringeNYC production, *American Muscle* is well on its way to achieving its goals, but it needs to go further.

The source material is fascinating. DeLorean's rise to power is now the stuff of success story legend, as he went from running General Motors to forming his own car company (his DMC-12 sports car served as Michael J. Fox's time machine in *Back to the Future*), only to have his world crumble when federal prosecutors tried him for drug trafficking. Thompkins Sr.'s background is full of colorful anecdotes from his time as a hot-rodder, and esoteric ruminations on the cars themselves. "Car's alive. It has lungs. It breathes," he tells us at the top of the show. *American Muscle* shows us that both men believe in the mythic power of the automobile.

I was confused, though, about Thompkins Jr.'s decision to parallel both men's lives. They have nothing in common besides a love of cars, nor did they ever know each other. But, I was intrigued by both men, and wanted there to be a deeper, more meaningful connection between them. I also wanted to know much more about them. DeLorean and Thompkins Sr. both come off as colorful characters who demand more stage time than *American Muscle* gives them.

Thompkins Jr. is a commanding presence on stage, and a talented writer. He has the makings of a great show here should he decide to explore his play's characters and themes further.

Written by:

Richard Thompkins

Directed by:

Christopher McElroen

Presented at the

New York
International Fringe
Festival