

Theater review: 'X Minus One' takes us back to the future

Sunday

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Counter-Productions Theater Company stages sci-fi stories from 1950s radio drama

By Keith Powers, Special to the Journal

According to the past, the future has shiny clothes. Wrist radios. Lots of guns. It's kinda sexist.

At least that's the science fiction future, when observed by the science fiction past. Bringing both alive, Counter-Productions Theater Company is staging four stories from "X Minus One," a 1950s radio drama, through Nov. 20 in AS220's Blackbox.

The four episodes represent the best from Counter-Productions' decade-long stagings of radio dramas, which originally ran during an era when space travel was mostly rocket ships, and Mars was very far away.

Directed by Rufus Qristofer Teixeira, the four stories vary in seriousness, but not in their old-time campy appeal. The original scripts (unidentified in the program) came from NBC staff writers Ernest Kinoy, George Lefferts and Thomas Godwin. Teixeira adapted them for the stage.

Brashly played in throw-back mode by a dozen members of the Counter-Productions troupe, the tales had vastly different plots. But each captured the kind of gentle threat that the unknown thing called space travel conveyed — before it actually started happening.

In the opening tale, Commander Colin Orde (anxiously paced out by Derek Smith), stranded in space for more than five years, suffers “solitosis.” He imagines one fictional companion after another (female, of course, and either subservient or sexually charged), until they finally gang up in a climactic hallucination.

Madison Avenue–man Sid Ryan (a spot-on portrayal by Counter-Productions’ artistic director Ted Clement) gets hired to publicized a Martian invasion in the second episode. Spoiler: it goes badly. Next, Capt. Thorson (Christopher Plonka) leads his Star-Trek–styled crew to the Galactic Barrier — never to be heard from again. Spoiler again: beware of the “space blues.”

The most realistic drama, and the one episode that stepped outside its science fiction conventions, was the finale, where Commander Barton (Patrick Keeffe), captaining a medical relief spaceship, must eject a stowaway (an emotionally charged reading by Meg Taylor-Roth) or fail to reach his destination. No spoiler here: the climactic scene, inevitable and weighty, was a winner.

There were many levels of enjoyment. Mostly, it’s a chance to relive dramatic presentations that would never ordinarily pass muster for modern audiences, audiences under the spell of technology that presents reality realistically — whether it exists or not.

“The Final Voyage of X Minus One,” staged by Counter-Productions Theatre Company, runs Nov. 11 through 20 at AS220’s Blackbox, 95 Empire St., Providence. Tickets are \$20. Visit cptcri.com.

Keith Powers writes about the arts. keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com; on Twitter @PowersKeith.

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