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THEATER REVIEW

Second City e.t.c. offers a fireball of funny

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Second City e.t.c. always faces a tough conundrum. It has to be sufficiently edgy and experimental that its parent institution doesn't seem in a creative rut. But on weekend nights when the main stage sells out, it also has to deliver enough laughs for a general audience out on the town and in search of a traditional Second City experience.

As directed by the emerging Matt Hovde, "Campaign Supernova" straddles those conflicting masters as well as Democrats screw up elections. And that's a compliment.

This ain't one of those killer e.t.c. shows—and I can think of several over the years, mostly involving Jack McBrayer—where you want to pull tourists aside and tell them to keep walking past the main stage. Nor is it one of those nights—ditto, also involving McBrayer—when wild risks are taken and green performers go up in flames. Consistently funny yet suffused with a lot that feels fresh and new, "Campaign Supernova" is bang in the middle. And that's exactly where it should be.

It's also another chapter in the ongoing march to dominance by Second City's women. In more recent years, the e.t.c. stage hasn't just been a spot for fresh-faced, up-and-comers but also for improvisers who've paid a lot of dues and worked in other groups all over town. Megan Grano, Amanda Blake Davis and Laura Grey all fall into that category. Grey has done terrific work in the all-femme, fake-sweet, comedy trio "Triplette," and she makes a stellar transition to Second City. In "Supernova," she performs a full-on, skilled mime routine with an audience member that's unlike anything I've ever seen on a Second City stage and quite charms the pants off the audience.

Other highlights include a savagely profane ditty by the three women about the ever-growing lists of male politicians who can't keep their appendages to themselves and very decent locally oriented material, including such Chicago-area eccentricities as potholes on Lake Shore Drive, guitarists at Potbelly sandwich shops (weird, weird), "It's Just Lunch" ("that's some low expectations,") and a real estate agent who rents billboards to market his own visage as one of his "Hot Properties."

I met Chaz "Hot Properties" Walters once, and, trust me, he more than qualifies for his 15 minutes of Second City fame. He's the touchstone here for a savage put-down of Chicago neighborhoods. The buyers want Logan Square. "Are you an artist who gave up on your dreams?" says Hot Chaz. "That's where you live."

Grey—the smart standout of a show that also includes affable work from Andy St. Clair, Timothy Edward Mason and Tom Flanigan—also takes down R. Kelly, even as she hails him for his lyrical iambic pentameters. Go to! Go to!

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