

Marcus Ratliff/The Art Beat

Local theater — with sparks flying

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Last week-end, four sell-out performances of "Frog," a new play by a Bennington College senior, created a visible ripple through

the very idea of local theater.

The ripples began when the lights came up and the first line, a volley of curses, was thrown like a heavy rock into a pond. From there they multiplied and radiated out into theater's horizon.

Director and playwright Pete Dinklage, who is also an actor, managed to hold the reins on his ornate imagination to create a well structured, smoothly built and almost flawlessly executed piece. It kept the audience flying with him through what was often a real *tour de force* of language and story-telling.

Dinklage's is a world, not unlike the best of contemporary American drama, in which identity — a sense of self — hangs in delicate balance. When you have to reinvent yourself every half an hour, the old selves blow away like onion skin. Scraps of memory and "facts" delivered via television, it sometimes seems, are all we have. And these things are to be hoarded.

So many of the last two decades' great American playwrights have dealt with ideas that Dinklage treats here. Sam Shepard, Edward Albee, David Mamet and Lyle Kessler take nothing for granted when they approach a character.

Everything must be created from scratch. These playwrights are exposing an America that no longer has a sense of itself. It lives from day to day like an animal, without family, without schooling, without a value system, and sometimes without language.

Dinklage told me this week that he wants to go on to make theater like, theater that will never be seen as "safe."

"Bennington has been a great place to write," he added.

Dinklage weaves a net of stories that joins obvious autobiography to fiction without a seam. In an interview, Dinklage said the emotion of the play is autobio-

graphical, and there are occasional snips of reality that slip in with just a light brush of fiction across them.

Dinklage's story centers on two brothers, separated for five years; one has pushed his mother down the stairs after she abused him and now mourns him. The older brother, Lemon, has discovered the younger living with a gay man who's addicted to television. ("What else am I going to do in this town?" he asks. "Play Bingo?").

At first Lemon seems to us quite deranged. He has been beaten up by a couple of Joe Namaths out in the shopping center parking lot. Yet all he was doing was letting the dogs loose — the sweaty ones in the cars with the windows rolled up.

His attackers stole his shark tooth, but they didn't get his other valued antiques — they didn't get his Polaroid photo, the one that's so dark even shades of black look light. This single prop, like so much in this play, is essential for Lemon's identity.

This is Dinklage's first produced play, but the senior from New Jersey hopes to get another one staged before he's kicked out into the world this June. He had nothing but praise for his cast who put together the play in three weeks: Hyla Matthews, Ian Bell, Brooks Ashmanskas and Brett Gillen submerge themselves in the play as if the roles had been created especially for them.

For those lucky enough to have seen this piece, no doubt it will be remembered as an auspicious beginning for a young playwright. Someone in line in front of me, waiting to get in said, "This play is fantastic, it borders on the incredible." Dinklage told me that another spectator had told him it had "depressed the hell out of him." Ah! the joy of theater. Amanda and I felt lucky and rich. In our new home town, Bennington, there's theater happening with sparks flying off it. And it's free.

I strongly urge any of you within a ripple of this newspaper to keep abreast of what theater is happening at Bennington College. It can make for an unforgettable night out. Just remember to leave your sweaty dogs some air in the car.

Playwright Marcus Ratliff writes a weekly column about the local arts scene.