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A Diverse Cast of One-Person Shows Plus a 'Streetcar' With Deaf Performers

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Do you like your theater literal and low-key, or avant-garde and abstract? It seems the Capital Fringe Festival has something for every taste.

It's hard to get less theatrical, for instance, than Rivka Willick in "Labor Daze," a collection of folk tales told around the subject of childbirth.

"We're trying to destroy the illusion of the fourth wall here," Willick told the audience at the Goethe-Institut Thursday night as she handed out programs herself. An offhand conversational mode dominated her hour-long show, even when a latecomer arrived halfway through the performance (a midwife fresh from a birth, we learned as apologies were exchanged).

The show may be short on conventional showmanship, but Willick -- who is also a doula, or labor assistant -- is personable and full of interesting information. She makes good use of props (at varying points a labor stool, forceps and a baby doll with significant history behind it) while telling tales of childbirth during war, peace and the Super Bowl. "Labor Daze" is casual as can be, and entirely likable.

Manitoba's Alix Sobler is almost as laid-back, but she creates multiple characters in a Capraesque story called "The Cloud Factory," about a small town where the lone industry -- cloud production -- is on the skids. Wearing tan overalls and a black T-shirt, Sobler looks the part -- parts, really -- of a fraying Anytown's populace, where the old folks are dug in for life and the young dream of getting away.

The story couldn't be more straightforward, and it's written with charm and affection. Local color and petty rivalries are efficiently evoked, the parody is gentle, and the verbal kickers that punctuate the ends of scenes are as thoughtful as the short banjo tune

that fills the brief transitions. There's nothing wily about Sobler's performance, but her understated approach feels like a virtue.

Further up the ladder toward high style you'll find Laura Zam, another woman going solo, in "How I Got Rich in a Year, Using That Secret: A Play for Believers, Skeptics and Slobs." Zam, a veteran of last year's festival ("Collaterally Damaged"), is back with another autobiographically driven piece, and she plays a handful of characters in this aggressive satire of self-help and karmic self-destruction.

"How I Got Rich" is more artsy in every way, from Zam's exaggerated voice and posture as a self-help guru -- a twang in his voice, and arms spread like a vulture's wings -- to her surprising sendup of "Laura Zam, performance artist." Her self-conscious gestures in skits introduced by the guru add to the irony that has defined many an arch solo show before hers.

The staging is a little rigid -- director Ian-Julian Williams keeps the dark-suited Zam nailed pretty close to center stage at Flashpoint's Mead Theatre Lab -- and at times the story loses its rhythm and sense of connections. More than the other pieces, though, this feels like the beginning of something that will surely grow; it's certainly riskier and meatier.

For style that at times seems wholly unmoored from substance, there's "Desire/Regret," a movement-driven piece at Source Theatre featuring a cast of hearing and deaf performers. The ensemble of nine enters doing a silent waltz, and dance without music marks much of the first section.

Tennessee Williams's "A Streetcar Named Desire" eventually emerges, with the movement growing a bit stagnant as the characters reach their famous crises. But the mood getting to that point is absorbing, with actors onstage and off creating a fugue of percussive noises, slamming props into place and lightly drumming on the metal gridwork supporting the seats -- a suitably unsettling accompaniment for the piece's dreamlike state of mind.

Capital Fringe Festival, through July 27 at various sites across the city. For tickets, go to the Capital Fringe box office, 607 New York Ave. NW, or visit <http://www.capfringe.org>. Tickets can also be purchased at the door of a given show one hour before showtime.