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A Prickly Friendship Endures, Even as Luck Wears Thin

In ‘Chinese Coffee,’ Louise Lasser Directs Austin Pendleton

By RACHEL SALTZ SEPT. 30, 2014



"Chinese Coffee": Austin Pendleton, standing, and Sean Walsh in Ira Lewis's play at the Roy Arias Stage II Theater. Credit Bobby Caputo

"Chinese Coffee," at the Roy Arias Stage II Theater, is an actors' evening. It's directed by a wonderful one, [Louise Lasser](#) (an ad for her acting studio is on the back of the program); features a very busy one, [Austin Pendleton](#) (himself a fine director); and was performed on Friday night for an audience stocked with lots of other ones, overheard discussing rehearsals, the odd one-woman musical and excellent directors around town.

So, here's to actors, although perhaps not so much to "[Chinese Coffee](#)," Ira Lewis's two-hander, whose appeal may be stronger for actors than for audiences. (More actorly cred: Al Pacino starred in a Broadway production, and directed a [movie version](#), with himself and Jerry Orbach, in 2000.)

The play has two meaty roles in Jake (Mr. Pendleton) and Harry (Sean Walsh), New York down-and-outers of the artistic sort who talk and talk late into a winter's night. But at 100 minutes or so, it feels uncomfortably like a long one-act, an extended pas de deux about a prickly friendship.

The play's pleasures are all about character, and Mr. Lewis has given Jake and Harry the bumpy neuroses of real people. Harry, a novelist who just lost his job as a doorman, is the kind of

hypochondriac who thinks a callous on his hand is cancer of the palm. Jake is a theatrical photographer sadly without clients. Both are broke.

Harry, we're told, is 44, and Jake 50, but the age disparity is obviously much greater. (Mr. Pendleton is in his 70s.) The pair seem more father-son or mentor-protégé than pals, which changes the dynamic of some of the back-and-forth, especially the discussions of women. (Those are, to put it generously, creaky.)

That mentor-protégé relationship is real offstage, too. The program tells us that Mr. Walsh is a student of Mr. Pendleton's and [Ms. Lasser](#)'s, and they should be proud: He more than holds his own — he holds the stage, finding the comedy in Harry's quirks without making him a caricature.

Mr. Pendleton is more jittery and less convincing. He's in near-constant motion, fiddling with things (thumping a pen or moving stacks of pennies) and delivering his lines with an improvisatory gusto. Sometimes this works, sometimes it feels forced.

Ms. Lasser's direction, like the play, is character-focused. There's not much action, and the confining space (Alison Buatti designed the nicely realistic 1980s apartment set) tethers the characters further. Toward the end, you may start to feel, as they must, trapped — with each other and themselves.