

**DESTRUCTION OF THE 4TH WORLD** Playwright Murray Mednick made his name here as pillar of new-play development, running the annual Padua Hills Playwrights Festival from the late '70s to the mid-'90s as a shrine to whatever linguistic and mythical fonts of creativity might be surging through the resident scribes. The foci of his own creative interests have been Native American folklore and his Jewish heritage. A poet first and structuralist later, Mednick uses mere voices as his point of entry into a new work — an approach used by Caryl Churchill and Suzan-Lori Parks, as well as the late Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett, whose end-of-the-world metaphysics and vaudeville aesthetic clearly informs Mednick's work. *Destruction of the 4th World* swirls around the grief of a father, Caleb (Michael Shamus Wiles), over the Holocaust-related suicide of his wife, Sarah (Yvette Wulff), who appears throughout as dancing figure/ghost presence. She's supplemented by another phantom, a Hopi prankster named Coyote (Kelly van Kirk), a figure who appears in many of Mednick's plays, here attired in a blend of Native-American and Orthodox Jewish attire.

Also grief-stricken is Caleb's precocious misfit son, young teen Bernie (Mike Lion), who finds sanctuary in the self-imposed isolation of his room, where electronics forms the entirety of his communication with and comprehension of the outside world. This kind of isolation is the implicit cause of the looming, falling sky, though this is not a world of causes and effects but of deeds and events that combine in a swirl of farce and ennui. Add to the mix Caleb's spitfire mother, Rosie (Laura James), drifting away in a nursing home, pursuing Nazi War criminals in a Rio de Janeiro of her mind; and Caleb's older son and his wife (Scott Victor Nelson and Kim Fitzgerald).

Despite these spirited performances, Kristi Schultz and Brian Fretté's staging does little visually to shape the elliptical script or to help clarify its purpose. Matt Aston's set design is entirely functional. (We see Bernie surrounded by electronics, though the door to his room is 2 feet tall. He crawls through it, the adults don't.) The mostly realistic acting style — in conjunction with the venue's exposed brick wall, and a couple of nondescript platforms that have been tossed up on the sides — merely flatten Mednick's poeticism. The play deserves some sense of visual design and style. Art Share, 801 E. Fourth Place, downtown; in rep, call for schedule; through April 19. (213) 625-1766. A Zoo District production. (Steven Leigh Morris)

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