

# Gay City NEWS



## Mirth After Meth

**BY DAVID KENNERLEY** | If you think “Methtacular!,” the bio-play by Steven Strafford, might be some straggler from the New York Fringe Festival, you’re not far off. Earlier this year, the piece was a hit at the Cincinnati Fringe Festival, where it won honors including Outstanding Solo Performance.

But when I read the promotional blurb — a “hilarious and harrowing” account of crystal methamphetamine addiction, complete with catchy tunes — I cringed. The party-and-play drug, affectionately known as “Tina” or “T” in some circles, has plagued the gay community for years and refuses to loosen its grip. In June, the meth-related death of 30-year-old adult film star Erik Rhodes, in Manhattan, caused a big stir in the media, a grim reminder of the drug’s vicious power.

Do we really need a lacerating comedy about crystal?

In this case, the answer is a resounding yes. For “Methtacular!,” which chronicles Strafford’s descent into rampant, meth-fueled, raw sex with a parade of strangers, at the cost of friends, family, work, health, and pretty much everything else, deeply respects its subject while skewering it.

And what a subject! Strafford recounts his torrid affair with the drug, starting about a decade ago when he was 22, living in Chicago, lonely and vulnerable. When a guy he met on a phone sex line offered him some, it was love at first bump. “There is nothing wrong with me,” he shrieks, feeling the adrenaline-pumped euphoria.

What followed was a string of binges at strangers' apartments, bathhouses, and his own place when his boyfriend was home. And when he wasn't.

Even after he lost multiple theater jobs (he was an aspiring actor), cycled through a few boyfriends, and found himself virtually homeless, couch surfing or crashing at Man's Country, he still couldn't come clean. His mother begged him to return home, but he was in denial.

"No more feelings, please," he commands, before doing another bump of "synthetic courage." Later, he used needles for a more intense high. Which meant the lows were lower, too.

But as gripping as the story is, "Methtacular!" would be nothing without Strafford's brilliantly sassy delivery. Under the assured guidance of Adam Fitzgerald, the play is self-deprecating without being self-indulgent, earnest without being sappy, and poignant without being preachy.

The impish actor is a master at spinning out tangents that feel spontaneous. He weaves his sordid tale with songs in the mold of his favorite musicals as well as gaudy '70s-style game shows ("What's My Meth?"), where he lures volunteers from the audience onstage. John McDaniel (LA Drama Critics Circle Award for a production there of "Chicago") is the music director.

Strafford's gift for physical comedy — a well-timed eye roll here, a coquettish shoulder shrug there — is reminiscent of Charles Busch or Lipsynka, minus the drag outfits. It's this glorious mash-up of brutal confessional and campy burlesque that lifts this piece above ordinary one-person shows.

The production values are more sophisticated than what you might find at a Fringe play. There's a realistic set (by David L. Arsenault) of an urban apartment with hardwood floors, exposed brick, and solid doors, that easily morphs into a game show scene with the pull of a spectacularly tacky Mylar curtain. At key moments, the Panasonic plasma screen comes alive with heartbreaking video clips of his flummoxed mother recalling her son's trip to hell and back.

To be sure, much of the appeal of this cautionary tale lies in its inherent happy ending (we know he doesn't die). Triumphantly creating a deeply personal work, Strafford achieves catharsis with his courageous "Methtacular!" He likely provides a measure of catharsis for certain audience members as well.

**METHTACULAR!** | Playroom Theater | 151 W. 46th St., eighth fl. | Through Sep. 23; Thu.-Sat. at 8 p.m.; Sun. at 5 p.m. | \$18 at [kefproductions.com](http://kefproductions.com) or 866-811-4111