

# THEATER

It's a mental image as immediately conjurable as the term "modern art" itself: an unimpressed, blue-collar kinda guy standing back from a color-splashed canvas, favoring all in earshot with the unsolicited appraisal, "My kid can do better than that!"

There's no such rube in *Walls: On Display in the Empty Gallery*, an interactive play-cum-art happening presented by Temenos Ensemble Theater and the Invisible Arts Project. But if there were, it's likely that he'd end the evening in the company of a few unexpected new friends.

To prove their point that art belongs to everybody, Temenos and the Invisible Arts Project have engineered a partially scripted, partially improvised spectacle in which the distinction between creator and viewer is swallowed whole, and almost any participant's opinion is accepted as valid.

The show places us in the company of some "celebrated" New York artists at the opening of the new Empty Gallery, the successor to the late, lamented (and similarly named) Gallery Vesciaouxz.

That space burned down two years ago,

or reasons that become apparent as the intimately acquainted visionaries begin to rehash old conflicts and allegiances. Some of the strongest words come from the hot-headed Santiago (Christian Kelty, also the co-creator of *Walls*) a multimedia performance artist who christens the Empty Gallery with a slide show/rant about his allegedly miserable existence. Stripped to the waist and hurling invective from behind black facial hair, Santiago looks like a portrait of the artist as circus strongman - which may explain his deep, complex relationship to Roma (Michael Wanzie), a reclusive pop artist who takes his inspiration from P.T. Barnum.

The opening of the Empty Gallery also marks Roma's return to activity after years of seclusion. Wishing him well via words and performance are Erikka (Sarah Matthews), a square-should-

**WHAT:** *Walls: On Display in the Empty Gallery*

**WHERE:** Temenos Ensemble Theater

**WHEN:** Through Sept. 22

**COST:** \$15; (407) 246-4590

## These Walls can talk

*Gallery reunion provides a frame for the right words*

BY STEVE SCHNEIDER



**Wall flowers:** Eccentric artists (Christian Kelty, Arwen Lowbridge and Beth Marshall) come into bloom inside an avant-garde hothouse

dered painter; Angelica (Arwen Lowbridge) and O (Amy Steinberg), a pair of ethereal lesbians; and Isis (Beth Marshall), a childlike "collage constructionist" who unveils an installation in which she stuffs magazine clippings into a toilet. The duty of passing judgment on these proceedings falls to a newspaper-critic named Eveyln (Michelle Kepner, previously seen as Simone the hooker in Temenos' *Joe's NYC Bar*).

In between presentations, we venture into a neighboring lounge to hobnob with the loquacious artists on all manner of aesthetically oriented topics. The segregation of prewritten and spontaneous discourse is more concrete (and thus more workable) than in any of the *Joe's* installments, though the play's structure is a bit off. Kelty and director Chad Lewis

modeled *Walls* on the 12 steps of development detailed in the popular handbook *The Artist's Way*, which proves a loop-sided outline for a dramatic progression. The only genuine story arc is the lingering hostility between Roma and Santiago, which is resolved too early and

too simply to connect with full impact.

That failing, however, melts into the show's irresistible atmosphere of wonder and welcome. The gallery performances are brilliantly staged, boasting a production design and effects that, while said to be a collaborative effort, bear the imaginative stamp of Lewis (fresh off his production-managing triumph on *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*). Inhabiting the modular gallery space is the most inviting set of characters Temenos has ever introduced. Wanzie is cast just far enough from type as Roma, an inherently benevolent spirit who can

still lay waste to the room with a well-chosen barb when one is needed. Most charismatic of all is the gallery's curator, Vesciaouxz (Holland Hayes), a quasi-European impresario who can not only make a short-pants-and-tie combo look good, but somehow maintain the veneer of perfect hospitality while giving point-blank instructions like, "I want you to sit down now." You never quite know when his showman's beneficence is genuine and when it's affected, nor do you care. As with *Walls* in general, asking what is real equals missing the point. ♦

PHOTO: GREGG MATTHEWS