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THEATER

From left, Liv Rooth, Carson Elrod and Kelly Hutchinson

James Leynse (left); Joan Marcus (right)

Better to Laugh Than Weep

REVIEW
TERRY TEACHOUT

Lives of the Saints
Primary Stages, The Duke on 42nd Street, 229 W. 42nd St. ($70), 646-223-3010, closes Mar. 27

New York

TO THE EARNEST, comedy is confusing. How can anything funny be truly serious? Their idea of a good time is a three-hour, six-hankie weeper about an atheist oncologist who comes home from a hard day at the storefront clinic to find his wife hanging from the showerhead, though they'll settle for "Death of a Salesman." If you doubt that such folk exist in abundance, ask yourself this: When did you last see David Ives's name on anybody's short list of major American playwrights? Yet Mr. Ives, who made his name writing comic sketches of the utmost brilliance and creativity before stepping up to the full-length plate with masterly plays like "New Jerusalem" and "Venus in Fur," is one of this country's half-dozen greatest living playwrights. An artist of the highest possible seriousness, he prefers to laugh at the vanity of human wishes instead of weeping.

"Lives of the Saints," Mr. Ives's latest off-Broadway venture, is a mixed bill of six one-act comedies, three of which are new and only one of which has previously been performed on a New York stage. If you've never seen any of his short plays, you'll be staggered by how much meaning he can pack into 15 tightly written minutes. One of the new plays, "Life Signs," is an epitome of his jovially surreal method. The curtain rises on a young man, his wife, his late mother and her spectacularly tactless doctor, who has just pronounced her dead. Only she isn't: No sooner does the doctor leave the room than she comes back to life and starts revealing jaw-dropping secrets about her sex life. The shock effect is explosively funny, but within a few minutes you start to figure out that "Life Signs" is really a disguised version of "Our Town" in miniature, and all at once everyone in the theater catches on, stops laughing and becomes swept up in matters of profound import.

Best of all is the title play, first staged in 1999, which Mr. Ives has declared to be "my favorite of any play I've ever written." Well might he think so. It's a propless pantomime-and-dialogue about Edna and Flo, two middle-aged Chicago ladies with three-inch-thick Polish accents ("Wasn't dat a beautyful funeral?") who are hard at work in the basement of their parish church, cooking a funeral breakfast for a woman they never knew. Just as he does in "Life Signs," Mr. Ives modulates into a seemingly distant dramatic key halfway through, and what started out as a zany study in slapstick becomes a heart-tuggingly poignant portrait of ordinary goodness.

Staged by John Rando, Mr. Ives's longtime theatrical collaborator, "Lives of the Saints" reunites the two men with Carson Elrod and Liv Rooth, who last worked together in Primary Stages' flawless 20th-anniversary revival of "All in the Timing," the 1993 evening of one-act plays that put its author on the map of American theater. This time around they're joined by Arnie Burton, Rick Holmes and Kelly Hutchinson, and the results are, as before, perfect in every possible way. Mr. Rando is unrivaled as a director of comedy, and his five cast members, who between them cover two dozen parts that range from a sexy washing machine (Ms. Rooth) to the potty-mouthed corpse (Ms. Hutchinson) who stops the show in "Life Signs," switch hats so deftly that you're not always sure who's playing whom (or what) at any given moment.

Mr. Teachout, the Journal's drama critic, is the author of "Duke: A Life of Duke Ellington," which recently received an ASCAP Foundation Deems Taylor/Virgil Thomson Award. Write to him at tteachout@wsj.com.

Fish in the Dark
Cort Theatre, 138 W. 48th St. ($49-$275), 212-239-6200 800-432-7250, closes June 7

"Fish in the Dark," which Larry David wrote as a vehicle for himself, is more in the nature of a well-remunerated personal appearance than an actual play. A thimbleweight comedy about two bickering brothers (played by Mr. David and Ben Shenkman) brought together by the death of their father, it consists of several thousand jokes, most of which involve somebody saying something inappropriate. Imagine a Neil Simon play without a plot—or three bottom-drawer episodes of "Curb Your Enthusiasm" hastily knocked together into a two-hour script—and you'll get the idea.

On stage, Mr. David is a self-caricature of a self-caricature. I've never seen anybody look less comfortable or more physically awkward in a starring role on Broadway. It isn't a comic effect, either: He clearly doesn't know what to do with himself up there other than fling his long arms around randomly. Anna D. Shapiro, the director, has taken care to surround him with 17 first-class stage actors, all of whom, especially Jayne Houdyshell and Lewis J. Stadlen, would be worth seeing in a real play. Todd Rosenthal's sets cost a lot of money.

Larry David

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