

Goldberg finds comedy on death row

By JIM LOWE, Staff Writer

BURLINGTON – Stephen Goldberg’s new comedy, “Don and Tom,” is wicked and wickedly funny, finding humor in two nasty criminals reliving their past and plotting their future while on death row.

“Don and Tom” just closed Friday, along with another new Goldberg comedy, “Hollywood,” in a production by the Burlington’s playwright’s One Take Productions at City Hall’s Contois Auditorium. (“Hollywood” was reviewed in the March 31 edition of The Times Argus.)

When “Don and Tom” opens, Tom, dressed in an orange prison suit, is revisiting his past. His “white trash” parents are fighting over him and his paternity, and his father lets Tom know in no uncertain terms that he’s no son of his, and wants nothing to do with him. Between these moments of excruciating pain, he remembers – perhaps fantasizes – about idyllic summer experiences at a cottage in Maine.

A psychiatrist enters and begins an examination, angrily demanding that Tom face what he has done – murdered his parents. Tom denies it vehemently, “I love my parents.”

Then Tom gets a roommate, Don, who says he’s been accused of doing worse. He’s been charged with raping and murdering a child. Don invites, even demands that Tom enter his fantasy world, where the two of them create a charter jet service. Their first customers are Hillary Clinton and George W. Bush.

That fantasy world is interrupted by the arrival of a preacher, a charismatic evangelical, who demands that they get down on their knees and repent. They refuse, completely unimpressed by this opportunity for eternal salvation. In one of the few truly comic moments of this 35-minute play, the exasperated preacher throws down cigarettes to get Tom and Don to kneel while he gives them his blessing. (A real Goldberg touch is that, after the preacher has left, the two realize that they don’t smoke.)

The two come to their expected demise, but there is plenty of the unexpected along the way.

How can this grisly tale be funny? It is a tribute to Goldberg’s mastery of black humor that not only can it be amusing, it really is. He does not dwell on the unpleasant crime details, but he delights in the general worthlessness of his characters. Rather than looking for the touch of heart in the most evil of characters, he finds the evil in even the nicest.

What makes this so amusing is that there is a disquieting grain of truth in everything, but with an infinitesimal speck of hope.

Goldberg directs all of his own productions, which seem to appear at the rate of about one a year. And though he cannot claim large audiences, he attracts some of the finest actors in the Burlington area.

Paul Soychak is delightful as the child-like Tom. It’s not clear whether the underlying feeling of menace comes from the character’s history, or Soychak’s subtly sly look behind the innocence. Aaron Masi, though a little too refined for the rough Don, soon has you believing he is able and willing to kill.

Al Salzman, returning to the Goldberg fold after a long hiatus, delivers the doctor with joyful arrogance. **John D. Alexander is a riot as the nasty over-zealous preacher, and even more unpleasant as Tom’s “father.”**

Alissa Juvan is effective as Tom’s exasperated and not particularly nice mother, while Dawn Kearon delivers an impassioned plea as his “normal” woman-friend. Goldberg productions tend to be a bit rough around the edges — and this is no exception — but despite that this one is very, very funny.

For several performances, “Don and Tom” has been paired with Goldberg’s other new comedy of the year, “Hollywood.” More traditional in nature, it pokes fun at the desperation of people seeking success in the movie capital, as well as the desperation of an unlikely character seeking love. It would be great if Goldberg could present his unique and deliciously black comedies around the state.