Critics’ Praise for Brian and Shevat:

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“…from absurdism to poignancy, lyricism to realism… surreal …clever…intimate space…” – Pioneer Press

“RECOMMENDED…an off-kilter, poetic romance with a side trip through Alice’s Wonderland……dreamlike language, giddy humor and a lush associative logic…” – TimeOut

“HIGHLY RECOMMENDED…resembles the best of Charlie Kaufman … befuddling and lovely and thoughtful… well worth experiencing…” – ChicagoCritic.com

“…a soft pillow of charming existential absurdity… a charming venture into playful, bizarre, frantic, casual and tender ridiculousities…” – Gay Chicago Magazine

“…nonsensical…funny…surreal…compelling…” – Tribune

“… sweet … funny, and quite charming…” – Chicago Reader

A Surreal Look at an Absurd Crush Turning to Love
by Brandon Hayes
ChicagoCritic.com (April 7, 2005)

Highly Recommended – Critic’s Pick!
There is often a first short story, an early poem, an unfinished one-act play that, in retrospect, often posthumously, scholars and publishers and producers look at and say, “There! Oh look there at the spark…the hint of what was to come!” I suspect that Gabrielle Reisman’s courageous new play, Brian and Shevat is such a work. That thought occurred to me when I heard a line of dialogue about filtering disappointment out of tap water and it called to mind the pitch-perfect absurdity of Gabriel Garcia-Marquez. And this in a play that resembles the best of Charlie Kaufman.

The play begins with a delicious, simple premise. The lights rise on a young woman and a young man (college-aged perhaps?) sleeping in a tiny bed in a tiny room. The girl wakes up. A moment later, the boy wakes up and, startled to find her there, asks, “What are you doing in my room?” The girl reverses the question back to him. And by the end of the scene he has acquiesced to let her stay there…in what is now their room. It is an elegant beginning to a play about the illusory nature of our natures in love. If not every scene matches the elegance of this opening, it’s fine, because the sum total of this one-act play is befuddling and lovely and thoughtful.

The girl, Shevat (Elizabeth Middleton), is an alternately calm and anxious mixture of fierce intelligence and vulnerability. She speaks in animals (ocelots mostly) and is the particular driving force for the absurdity in this script that juxtaposes the relatively commonplace situation of twenty-something
roommates falling for each other with persistent, fierce and almost violent, at least insistent, natural imagery. Shevat decides she needs Brian (Jimmy Freund), and she speaks in a language almost metaphysical, but still profoundly urgent. She is convinced, you see, that she saw him in a mirror and stepped through, not unlike Alice, and into his bed. Brian has more straightforward problems where Shevat is concerned. He needs to keep her presence in his room hidden from his landlady, and he needs to stop the small war that’s developed between his best friend and Shevat.

Reisman, working with director Jarrett Dapier, has penned a script that works beautifully in the side project’s tiny playing space, little more than a room with some seats on either side. The staging evokes Brian’s studio apartment and the local park (among other locales), sometimes switching instantly back and forth between the two. The pacing lags here and there, partly because of the premise of the script and the often abstract language. But overall, Dapier has given this play a gentle, convincing staging, generally highlighting the script’s moments of poetry.

Jimmy Freund, playing Brian and other characters including Brian’s best friend and the ice cream man in the park, gives a solid, confident performance. Brian is the straight man to the strange and fantastical Shevat, but Freund gets to flex his acting muscles in his multiple characters.

The one single element of this production that sells the play and the entire evening more convincingly than any other is Elizabeth Middleton’s transcendent performance as Shevat (and others). Although there are situations in this absurdist play that wring slightly off key, and although great portions of her dialogue make only a passing glance at sense, Middleton’s confidence and commitment to the character make her performance a touchstone for the audience even as she is the least real element of the play. What makes her performance so impressive is that she is convincing as Brian’s best friend (yes, Middleton and Freund share the character) and the landlady and the ice cream man (they share him too). Yet, when she is playing Shevat, all the audience sees is the character, and as realized by Middleton, it’s easy to believe the odd things she says. Middleton’s lyrical performance is the heart of this play.

Expanding out from Middleton’s vulnerable, plucky Shevat, the play slowly becomes a love story without a love affair. A love poem to intimate friendship, perhaps. Or maybe an unfolded look at that moment at the verge of fascination with another person. As nonsensical as the play can be, slowly a feeling of familiarity develops. The play is, really, about the moment of meeting someone expanded and stretched to a revealing extreme. Even in the moments where the play indulges perhaps too much in its absurdity or is a bit too naively complicated, the growing effect is of transcendent familiarity with an often glossed-over moment. Brian and Shevat and Elizabeth Middleton’s lovely performance are well worth experiencing.

(Editor’s Note: I like this show and so’ll you – Tom Williams)

Supercalifragilistic!
by Leah Zeldes
Pioneer Local (4/6/05)
If you’ve yet to discover the side project theatre company in Rogers Park, don’t wait any longer. In one of the city’s smallest, sparsest performance spaces – and easy-to-miss storefront by the Jarvis ‘L’, holding at most 32 seats – the side project regularly produces exquisite plays that leave audiences wonderstruck.
Its world premiere of Lakeview playwright Gabrielle Reisman’s enchanting *Brian and Shevat* is no exception. This quirky, inter-dimensional love story combines the mystic lyricism of Ray Bradbury with the magical whimsy of *Mary Poppins*.

Brian Magyar, a restaurant line cook, wakes one morning to find an unknown woman in the room where he’s lived for three years. He asks what she’s doing there. But she demands to know what he’s doing in *her* room. Pointing out all of his belongings, Brian again asserts that it’s his room and, moreover, that she’s dressed in his clothes. She concedes the clothes, but persists in claiming the room. She agrees to let him stay, however, if he’ll pay half the rent. He’s so bowled over by her insistence that he agrees and goes back to bed.

Jimmy Freund gives an expressive performance as Brian. You see him thinking, “Maybe this is a dream and she’ll be gone when I wake up.”

But she’s still there. While Brian sleeps, she tells the audience, “I was once gone for so long that, when I came home again, I had forgotten how to speak. Words never came properly out my mouth, just lions and ocelots. Animals.” And then, “Suddenly,” she says, “I saw through to the other side of the mirror.”

To Brian, she gives her name as Shevat LaGrange and makes tea with a kettle he didn’t know he had from water she’s filtered to remove the “disappointment.” She speaks in portmanteau words, like “insististancialist” and “exploratedious.” When Brian says he cooks things for a living, she asks, “Like anything, like shoes or palm trees, or – ?”

Elizabeth Middleton plays Shevat with a stolid matter-of-factness, spit-spot, as if the many peculiarities of her life are only to be expected. She’s disturbed only by the mysterious telegrams that keep turning up.

In the park, Shevat meets Hal, an ice-cream and corndog vendor, apparently an old friend. Their otherworldly conversations about food and philosophy bring Mary Poppins and Bert the Chimney Sweep to mind.

Brian tells his friend Hugo about Shevat; she’s crazy, yet strangely familiar. A punk who’s addicted to cough syrup, Hugo is extremely jealous of this new claimant on his pal’s time and affection, yet curiously seems to know things about her he’s never been told. But Brian’s landlady, Silva, oddly makes no trouble about the new roommate.

Hal, Hugo and Silva are all played alternately by Freund and Middleton, or by Brian and Shevat, first by one and then by the other, depending on who’s in which scene. Ultimately, both play every role, and these transformations often occur onstage, adding an even more surreal edge to the play. Jarrett Dapier’s illuminating direction makes lucid what could be confusing while making clever use of the intimate space.

Meanwhile, the chemistry between Brian and Shevat builds. More of the mysteries are explained, or at least made clearer.
As the playwright veers from absurdism to poignancy, lyricism to realism, she gets carried away for a few over-the-top moments of poesy, but ultimately things settle down again for a satisfying end to this strange and lovely play.

**Kay Daley**  
*TimeOut Chicago (4/7/05)*

In Renaissance romance, there is an oft-repeated story of a young woman who gazes into an enchanted mirror, sees a dashing young knight and falls in love. Her life becomes a quest to find the knight and fulfill her destiny. The story endures for centuries because it explains love’s complicated interplay of self-perception and self-assertion. To find true love is to find oneself, so the story goes, but at the risk of losing oneself in another.

In her world-premiere play, Reisman offers a lyrical, teasing remake of this traditional mirror story. Dreamy, whimsical Shevat (Middleton) finds herself in the bed of a stranger (Freund). But just as we think we’re seeing the typical “morning after” story, Reisman throws us a curve ball: the two have no idea how they came together.

What ensues is an off-kilter, poetic romance with a side trip through Alice’s Wonderland. Reisman mines all the typical dilemmas of love, but avoids cliché through dreamlike language, giddy humor and a lush associative logic that rules this world of love. She’s well served by her cast, which brings a refreshing sincerity and wonder to the ornate language. As Shevat, Middleton is thoroughly likable in a role that could have easily been a stale remake of TV’s Dharma. She’s ably matched by Freund, who creates an Everyman with enough personality to stand up to Shevat’s daffy flair. Both actors also play the three secondary characters, a neat trick that adds psychological depth to their struggles to come together.

**Brian and Shevat**  
by Venus Zarris  
*Gay Chicago (4/12/05)*

2 1/2 STARS

I will admit to you that there has been a few times in my life when I woke up not being immediately sure who I was in bed with. Once I rolled over and saw who it was though, the previous evening’s events quickly came back to me and I realized the identity of my partner. But imagine waking up to someone who is wearing your clothes but who you don’t know from Adam. Then imagine questioning them as to who they are and how they got into your home and they answer by turning the tables, asking you the very same questions.

This is how *the side project* theatre company’s world premiere of *Brian and Shevat* opens. It offers a pleasant dose of absurdism light as we travel through Gabrielle Reisman’s witty 70-minute distorted window into love, location, connectedness, idiosyncrasies, dimensional travel and ice cream.

The script is filled with little jewels of free form thought like: “Matter is so smart. It never gets bogged down by the rules of form.”, “I got a filter for the water. It was full of disappointment.” and “Ice cream is the solution.” (A cosmic truth that I have related to on several occasions.)
Jimmy Freund is very good as Brian and Elizabeth Middleton is excellent as Shevat. They also embody the play’s other characters, switching off from scene to scene to both play the same people at different points in the show. This raises the questions, is anyone really who they appear to be and does it even matter?

Flavored with influences like Eugene Ionesco and delving into the notion of spatial plurality, Reisman’s clever script is a soft pillow of charming existential absurdity with a few uncomfortable lumps thrown in for the sake of some cerebral tossing and turning. But the script needs more thought behind its construction to satisfy as a fully actualized project and deliver something more than an amusing and entertaining acting exercise. The potential is there but it relies more on the deives of absurdism, rather than totally committing to its lack of form or connecting us to something more solid with these devices.

The direction was too loose to pull the production together and give the scenes enough importance, thus losing some of their possible impact.

Still, Brian and Shevat is a charming venture into playful, bizarre, frantic, casual and tender ridiculousities. Sadly, it is all too easy for us to forget how limitlessly fluid our lives and thoughts can be while stuck in the day to day of this tactile existence. As the corndog man reminds us, “People aren’t nailed to the ground. They can move from state to state and dimension to dimension.”

Kerry Reid
Chicago Reader (4/8/05)
Gabrielle Reisman's fable of true love among the Gen-Y set is sweet, occasionally funny, and quite charming thanks to actors Jimmy Freund and Elizabeth Middleton. But there's something missing. In keeping with the current vogue for love stories involving time/memory displacement (Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, The Time Traveler’s Wife), Reisman's one-act mysteriously drops Shevat, a standard-issue mercurial child-woman, into the studio apartment of Brian, a cook. Freund and Middleton play not only the lovers but all the other roles, including Brian's aggressive stoner friend, the addled landlady, and a mysterious pushcart salesman who delivers bite-size nuggets o' wisdom as well as ice cream and corn dogs. Jarrett Dapier directs a solid staging for the Side Project, in a shoe-box space that's always tricky. But Reisman's meditation on the porous boundaries between her lovers lacks dramatic payoff.

Nina Metz
Chicago Tribune (4/8/05)
Gabrielle Reisman's goof of a play, Brian and Shevat, starts off promisingly enough. Nonsensical but funny, it lays out the story of two people who awake one morning to find they inhabit the same studio apartment. It is a surreal moment and neither will admit he or she is an intruder, and so they grudgingly agree to split the rent.

Brian is the level-headed one; Shevat the plucky, whimsical one — she uses non-words such as "overreactifying" and "intensiforical" and complains of tap water full of chlorine and disappointment. Initially, there is something compelling about these two, and director Jarrett Dapier makes the most of the Side Project's tiny space. But midway through, the play begins spinning its wheels. "You can't be ambiguous all the time," Brian says at one point. "It's not getting us anywhere." It's advice the playwright should take to heart.