

CITY PAGES

Our Garage through October 7

Spotlight: Philip Guston Standing on His Head Standing Philip Guston on His Head



Image: Off-Leash Area
by [Quinton Skinner](#)
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When American painter Philip Guston wandered off the Abstract Expressionist reservation, it was to explore a weird, brutish terrain of junk imagery and comic personae. He also explored profound isolation once the art world turned its back on him, after an evisceration in the *New York Times*. He'd slipped into semi-seclusion before his eventual rehabilitation; death came soon after. *Philip Guston* is a free-form artistic biography, a meditative hour spent in an ideational space that evokes the depressive monotony of his days as well as the anarchy and freewheeling oddness of his imagery. Guston (Paul Herwig) rises, brushes his teeth, and interacts with the few things that seem to have any meaning for him: a paintbrush, a cigarette, a bottle of booze, a sandwich. Oh yeah, and a wife, Musa (Jennifer Ilse). She checks in on him, and through minimal dialogue we learn that she too was a painter. Musa, however, dropped her aspirations in order to fulfill her role tending to the great man. The music is discordant and dissonant, save for when it locks in to dense rhythmic loops, and as the action develops we begin to see Guston as a trapped man, unable to escape the density of his artistic vision. He's not trapped by Musa, though, who is depicted as his link to reality: The sweetly smiling Ilse at one point has to squeeze through a small hole in the wall in order to come near her husband. (Herwig designed the pink-and-red set, which nicely captures some of the queasy violence of Guston's work.) Matters pick up toward the end, with Guston's crude, cartoony heads, shields, and shoes dominating the set. It's unusual to see theater so preoccupied with the visual, and so willing to trust itself to tell a story with such minimal text. But the result is moving, beautiful in its ugliness, and free of cliché—a fitting tribute to Guston's difficult aesthetic. (Quinton Skinner)