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Theater review: 'Pillowman' smothers audience in gloom

BY MICHAEL MORAIN • REGISTER THEATER CRITIC • MARCH 16, 2009

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Run, run as fast as you can. Run away from “The Pillowman.”

The pitch-black play about various methods to murder children — or, as one character observes, “101 ways to skewer a 5-year-old” — is as creepy as it sounds. And while the local theater company Change tries to elevate the script into something revelatory during the play’s run through Sunday at Grand View’s Viking Theatre, the production fails to deliver anything more than an emotional bludgeoning.

That’s a big shame, particularly since playwright Martin McDonagh’s “The Lieutenant of Inishmore” was so successful last year at StageWest. That story was just as dark and far more gory — one character blithely plucked off another’s toenails — but it was a comic romp compared to this one. There are jokes in “The Pillowman,” too, but they’re scattered so sparsely amid 2 hours and 45 minutes of gloom that it’s hard to muster up the will to laugh.

The problem isn’t Kristin Larson’s direction, which is pretty straightforward. It’s not Thatcher Williams’ spare set or Peter Jackel’s dream-like lighting or even Angelo Rossi’s grim music, which he composed for the show.

No, the problem here is the story itself, which begins when officials in an unidentified totalitarian state lock a writer in jail because there are too many similarities between his stories and a series of gruesome child murders. Although the plot offers some whodunit intrigue and asks some important questions about artistic freedom, the disorganized script alternates between angry banter and long-winded monologues that suck the life out of the show’s dirge-like pace.

It doesn’t help that the story’s hero — the guy we’re supposed to root for — works in a slaughterhouse, uses his free time to write stories about kids who swallow razor blades, and fatally smothers three other characters before the third act. His name is Katurian and he’s a — what’s the word? Oh, right: nutcase.

It’s thanks only to actor Craig Petersen’s tightly-wound talent that Katurian seems even human. His wild

eyes and high furrowed forehead hint at the emotions hidden within, from confusion to anger to simpering fear. When he starts to piece together the facts that land him in jail, for example, the realization works its way over his face and down through the rest of his body until he's kneeling, sobbing over a prison chair.

It's a heartbreaking moment, made even more poignant by the fact that the other person on stage — Williams, in the role of Katurian's brain-damaged brother — only vaguely understands that anything's wrong. He rocks gently back and forth, grabbing his pant leg, grasping only the fringe of reality around him.

Chris Ragner and David Oddy round out the main cast as the tag-teaming cops who interrogate the brothers. Ragner is coolly condescending, Oddy is hot-headed, and both are effectively monstrous.

But a carpenter can't build a table out of rotten wood. A chef can't bake a soufflé out of sewage. And here, even talented actors can't tell a good story with a terrible script.

The final scene ties up some of the plot's loose ends but leaves the rest as frayed as the audience's nerves. And the worst part: That might be just what the playwright intended.

"I'm not trying to tell you anything," Katurian tells his interrogators when they ask about one of his stories. "It's supposed to be a puzzle without a solution . . . but the truth is there is no solution, because there's nothing worse, is there?"

Let's hope not. This one was horrific enough.

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