



Disturbingly intense production risky choice for company

A theatre review by John Busbee for The Culture Buzz

Des Moines, Iowa Theater...for a change continues to grow in both its range of production work as well as its risk-taking. Its current production, *The Pillowman*, is a dark offering from the award-winning Martin McDonagh. As with much of McDonagh's work, this show is not for the faint of heart. This show, however, takes us to a hellish realm: it deals with child abuse and murder and twisted characters flawed perhaps beyond redemption. It's as if the playwright is daring audiences to embrace his work despite the show's content and indulgent dialogue. Yet, even after the play's entire emotional battering, McDonagh delivers something onto which we can cling. Still, this is not this reviewer's favorite McDonagh script.

Theater...for a change takes an ambitious chance with this production. For a relatively new company to consider such a work shows a growing level of challenging its audiences. And, yes, audiences will be challenged by this production.

The Pillowman mercilessly drags the audience into a wretched world of police brutality and morbid endeavors. Opening with an increasingly violent interrogation of the writer of short stories, the police try to extract the reason stories from this writer accurately portray the recent murders they are trying to solve. As cops Tupolski and Ariel, Chris Ragner and David Oddy, respectively, deliver a wound-too-tight edge as they attempt to break their suspect, Katurian (Craig Petersen). The pacing of this opening act never gets out of first gear, however. McDonagh's language begs a rapid-fire delivery with the dialogue fairly overlaying each line. These are three fine, experienced actors, but they couldn't seem to gain the overall speed needed. Delivery of McDonagh's language can't be deliberate and calculated; it must possess a visceral, quick-paced, natural rhythm. Even then, if the script tends toward bludgeoning the audience with overly-lengthy oration, even the best actors will be challenged to elevate a script to a smooth running speed. And, although it occasionally happens, this production doesn't consistently achieve that necessary running speed.

That being said, there are several scenes which achieve strong action and interaction. The sinister, understated Ragner and mercurial, brittle Oddy embody complex characters that deliver twists and revelations. Petersen embraces a natural sense of timing that is both disarming and resilient. His expressive Katurian evolves as the story evolves, drawing all into his developing persona.

As Katurian's brother, Michal, Thatcher Williams brings a consistent aura to this damaged character. Act 2 gives Williams and Petersen excellent opportunity for interplay, which they achieve with realistic results. As Mother and Father, Jami Bassman and Larry Mahlstedt wrap their scenes in a dream-like state of suspension as horrific and Ozzy-and-Harriet moments alternate. The flashback and enactment scenes delivered a subtle surrealism this reviewer found appealing. As the Girl, Sydney Lundberg does a marvelous job in a play that severely challenges such a young performer.

Combining the Scenic Design and Scenic Artist talents of Thatcher Williams and Brent Houzenga, respectively, the setting offers a flexible, intriguing starkness. One especially appealing element is the second level that divides the upstage from downstage areas with a rounded edge, somewhat like an emotional wave about to sweep onto a graffiti-laden shore. Peter Jackel's haunting lighting design is expressively enhanced by Angelo Rossi's original music: somber, foreboding and depressing.

This production is not for those with short attention spans, either. It runs long – 2 hours and 45 minutes, in three acts. It should run much less, and McDonagh's script is unforgiving when delivered too slowly. Coupled with content that doesn't easily lend itself to humor – even the playwright's signature dark humor – this becomes a force of wills between audience and production. For the adventurous, however, this is a challenge waiting to be met.