

Pillow Talk: "The Pillowman," at ComedySportz through June 3

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 30 May 2006 23:07



Degree of difficulty counts for a lot, so director Sean Leary and his estimable cast would earn points merely for the mere existence of Martin McDonagh's horrific fairy tale *The Pillowman*, the latest – and certainly riskiest – endeavor from My Verona Productions. McDonagh's play is, quite simply, stunning, a beautifully written, subversively funny, and frequently nerve-racking dramatic thriller. Set in an interrogation room within a fictitious totalitarian regime, author Katurian Katurian (Adam Michael Lewis) endures verbal and physical abuse at the hands of detectives Tupolski (Chris Browne) and Ariel (Tom Walljasper); two local children have been found murdered, another is missing, and as the particulars of the crimes bear a striking similarity to the imagined child-killings in stories Katurian himself writes, the detectives demand a confession. (They're not "good cop/bad cop" so much as "pretty bad cop/really bad cop.") What follows is a nightmare meditation on the power, and responsibility, of storytelling, fashioned by a storyteller of remarkable skill and subtlety.

The playwright has a great many things to say about childhood trauma and its effect on the artistic process – both for artist and audience – yet considering the show's often-repellent subject matter, its themes are presented with the lightest of touches. Plenty of scenes in the work are designed to make audiences wince and recoil – the violence comes swiftly, and the threat of violence is ever-present – but just as many lull you in with an unexpected gentleness; *The Pillowman*

has gravitas but is never oppressive, and McDonagh's raffish humor is like a tonic. It's the sort of magical theatrical work that audiences can simply enjoy as a spine-tingling creepshow, or, after the curtain call, excitedly discuss with friends, over drinks, for hours on end.

Leary – who, with *Pillowman* co-star Tristan Tapscott, serves as My Verona's co-founder and producer – deserves props for bringing McDonagh's 2003 play to area audiences; it's exactly the kind of unpredictable, thrilling entertainment we're exposed to all too infrequently and deserve far more often. Yet a work of its caliber brings with it an intimidating set of expectations – if you're gonna do *The Pillowman*, you'd better be able to do *The Pillowman* right – and with the unique challenges faced by My Verona in its presentation of this show, it's understandable that audiences could enter the production feeling somewhat, shall we say, leery.

ComedySportz is, oftentimes, a perfectly acceptable theatrical venue, and last season, My Verona did fine things with the limited, narrow space in *Closer* and *The Santaland Diaries*. Yet there's not much to be done about the building's minimal stage space and bare-bones lighting and sound systems – ComedySportz isn't designed for the effects that would make *The Pillowman* as viscerally entertaining as it probably could be. (The Broadway production received Tony Awards for scenic and lighting design.) Beyond technical constraints, the weekend performances by the ComedySportz improv group itself require that

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begin at 10 p.m., so audiences shouldn't expect to leave the building until close to 12:45 a.m., which can be a long haul even if you're mad about McDonagh's work. There are, I'm sure, a great many reasons for My Verona's loyalty to the ComedySportz space, but, for this particular production, seeking another venue (and an earlier starting time) may have been appropriate.

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And then there's this mention, from last Thursday's *Rock Island Argus/Dispatch* – Leary, describing the differences between the Broadway and My Verona productions of McDonagh's work: "Ours is more of a multimedia show, using a projector during some scenes to simulate kind of a live-action graphic novel." That description, for me at least, set off a few alarms. (The phrase "multimedia," in relation to theatrical works, always makes me nervous, as it suggests an impatience with basic narrative tenets, and

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doesn't really have any kind of graphic-novel sensibility – it's more of a wicked, ghastly bedtime story.) It's been said that if you cast your show correctly, half of your work as a director is done, and with the actors assembled for

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, Leary's work was, to put it mildly, halfway done. What about the
other
half?

It's quite good. Leary orchestrates the escalating tension with a sure, deft hand, and while the actors' conversational rhythms are marvelously well-calibrated – particularly when Lewis' and Walljasper's overlapping dialogue reaches a boil – he has a terrific ear for silence, and the disquieting moments that interrupt it; when one of the detectives shakes a small white box in Katurian's face, the light rattling of the contents within gives you the heebie-jeebies, and at one point, the full menace of Browne's cop is crystalized with the perfectly-timed click! of his pen. *The Pillowman*

gains in creepy, suggestive heft as it progresses, and Leary's passion for the project is evident through his stage compositions – the interrogation room actually seems to tighten as the show nears its climax – and the breathing room he gives his sensational performers.

Chris Browne is a peerless dry comic here. He invests his line readings with a hysterical, withering incredulity, and enacts something I'm not sure I've ever seen on-stage before – malevolent ennui. Browne's portrayal proves a splendid counterpoint to Tom Walljasper's blistering, nervous energy, and the two play off each other with seasoned flair. (I could go on about Walljasper's focused, heartfelt work here, but after last week's *Reader* article on the actor, I'm not sure what more I could say without lapsing into embarrassing fan-boy gushing.)

Tristan Tapscott, who plays Katurian's childlike brother, Michal, gives what is easily the best performance I've yet seen from him, and that's saying a lot; his outstanding actor's instincts and inventiveness in the role are a little overwhelming. And Lewis blazes through his demanding role with great enthusiasm – in the scenes of Katurian breaking down in sobs, Lewis' physical and emotional abandon are devastating – although he does engage in a bit too much stand-up-comic blitheness during his on-stage re-tellings of Katurian's stories. Lewis' delivery doesn't reveal an author's energy so much as an actor's energy; his Katurian tosses off the tales' narration like a performer eager to get to the good parts, without taking the time to luxuriate in their grim (and Grimm) preambles – the entirety of the stories, and not just the gruesome punchlines, is "the good parts."

A couple of Katurian's tales are also slightly impeded by the staging, which is where that "multimedia" angle comes in. McDonagh's language is so sublime, and the actors delivering the

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dialogue are so strong, that you don't want to miss anything through changing points of focus – as happens when we're looking at screened, "graphic-novel" visualizations – and watching action in both the front and rear of the ComedySportz venue, as in a demented ping-pong match. These moments, however, are only momentary lapses. My Verona's *The Pillowman* is invigorating, hugely entertaining theatre. I just don't want Leary and his organization to be afraid of simplicity; the power of a good tale well-told can, in and of itself, be exhilarating. Sometimes, less is most definitely more.

For tickets to *The Pillowman*, call (309)786-7733 extension 2.