

The Culture Buzz

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These are not the simple joys of maidenhood

Theatrical review by John Busbee for The Culture Buzz

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Tallgrass Theatre Company continues developing not only its creative evolution, but also enriching its relatively young legacy with its current production, “Death and the Maiden,” running through May 1. Ariel Dorfman’s award-winning, cerebral psycho-drama definitely challenges the audience with its sophisticated messages and relationships while also challenging its cast and production team to deliver this content. This fascinating choice for Tallgrass becomes more appealing when considering the massive shifts in global politics, terrorism and human rights that have happened since Dorfman’s play was first produced in London in 1991.

“Death and the Maiden” is a complex psychological battle of wills between Paulina Salas, her husband, Gerardo, and Dr. Miranda, a seemingly friendly stranger who provided Gerardo with a ride home after a car breakdown. Trouble begins when Paulina claims to recognize Miranda’s voice and accuses him of torturing her during her days as a prisoner of her country’s former government. Dr. Miranda denies knowledge of such events, but Paulina is determined to have her revenge. Gerardo is caught in the middle, forced to decide if his wife is telling the truth or reacting irrationally due to her past trauma. The confrontation and shifts in power between the three inevitably raises issues of justice and revenge, especially in relationship to the punishment of war criminals.

Issues of death pervade this script, from the real deaths of past political prisoners, to the metaphorical deaths of parts of a person’s mental well-being, to the possible death of the captive Miranda. Truth is illusive, often veiled or completely hidden from the interactions as choices are made, and no-return directions are established. This script doesn’t give audience or cast a respite from the tension, as “Death and the Maiden” is presented without intermission.

Scenic and Lighting Designer James Stephenson again demonstrates how to get the most from the modest stage space, giving the audience a compelling, efficient setting for the play’s action. The use of semi-transparent sheers separating the main room from the balcony, when coupled with reveals through lighting, is especially effective. A fine detail was with the incoming and receding headlights of a car through the front door. Excellent choices in pre-show and scene-changing sound design were made by Director Ron Gilbert, however, continuing ocean-front and other sound elements throughout the play would have added a seductive layer to the drama unfolding onstage.

As Paulina Salas Escobar, Becky Scholtec expands her acting repertoire with a complex, damaged, yet dangerous character. Her role truly achieves its high-tension best towards the end of the show, as she asserts her power to a climactic breaking point. Bob Baskerville portrays her husband, Gerardo Escobar, giving his role the conflicted, morals-balancing challenges the husband, politician, and emotional caretaker to his wife bring. The limits of his love for Paulina are tested as Gerardo is caught in the irrevocable actions triggered by her past pain. Dr. Roberto Miranda, the catalytic character, is given life by Mark Littlejohn, as his role increases in complexity and ambiguity as the stakes escalate.

During this opening night performance, the only shortcoming was in not fully achieving the underlying tension inherent in the script. The pace and expected tension will most likely grow as the production enters its second and third weeks.

“Death and the Maiden” gives the growing cadre of Tallgrass Theatre Company fans another reason to invest an evening with this community-enriching troupe’s current offering. The production qualities and appealing intimacy of their venue leave all who experience their efforts anticipating future shows. “Death and the Maiden” runs through May 1.