

THE PILLOWMAN AT THE BERKELEY REP



Our Social Coordinator hustled up some opening night tix for the savage black comedy by the Irish writer, Martin McDonagh, best known for his Leenane Trilogy (The Beauty Queen of Leenane, A Skull in Connemara, and "The Lonesome West"). The quirky author wrote all seven of his highly acclaimed plays in 1994, and other than the screenplay for last year's academy award winner "The Six Shooter", has not written or published another word, although the word is that he is working on a full-length movie titled "In Bruges."

One time Wally Shawn warned us face-to-face in person NOT to see his own play debuting at New York's National because, "It's not a light evening of entertainment at the 'theatre'; its not a nice play at all." (Referring to "Aunt Dan and Lemon"

One could say the same about the far more graphically violent "Pillowman" as well, although there all similarities end.

Imagine if Kafka, Quentin Tarantino, Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov managed to cobble together a script.

A man is brought into a spartan room with a backdrop reminiscent of those old European buildings built in the 1700's by aristocracy but long since converted to drap bureaucratic use. He has been arrested and two policemen in an admitted "totalitarian state" set about to interrogate the man -- with no indication as to the details, nature, or cause of his arrest. The policemen taunt the man, trying to get him to guess the cause of his arrest, with the threat of physical violence ratcheting up from the level of silliness to direct action.

"Perhaps it has something to do with my stories?" The captive (played convincingly well by Erik Lochtefeld) asks.

"What makes you think it has to do with your stories?" Queries policeman Tupolski (Played by a superbly beaucroatic, yet intimidating, Tony Amendola).

"Because you brought them in a box with you. There they are on your desk."

"Have you been reading what's on my desk?!" Tupolski says threateningly as he rises up to stand over the seated man.

The immanent threat of violence continues to rise until, in a rage, the bear-like Ariel (played with just a hint of a Northern Irish accent by Andy Murray) throws Katchurian to the ground, straddles him and solidly lands punch after full swing punch into Katchurian's head with thuggish determination.

It is shocking and it is most certainly not a play for the squeamish as this beating scene is by far the mildest of the violence described and presented. Characters are murdered via suffocation, nailed to crosses in mock crucifixions, flogged, buried alive in see-through coffins, connected to electroshock devices, tortured half-seen through scrimms with electric drills, and -- in the most graphic sequence -- shot in the back of the head to die in pools of blood. All done with a jabbing sense of humor.



And that's just the visuals. There are the offstage torture sessions with vivid sound effects that allow the imagination to conjure what it will. Far more is presented in the form of those stories by the writer Katchurian.

Well, it is our duty to inform the public. And inform them that the first act is 90 minutes long before the intermission sends the entire audience to the lavatory lines.

So much for the bad stuff. If this were Tarantino, who likes to shock with grisly images -- it seems -- just because he finds it amusing and all at the level of comic books, the play would not have earned the many awards it has. Jeff Goldblum and Billy Crudup snagged standing ovations for the Broadway premier last year, earned two Tony Awards, and caused many of the critics to applaud the appearance of intelligent, meaningful drama "finally!" to Broadway.

All right now, here is the stuff: A writer is arrested within an unnamed totalitarian state somewhere in the world because children are being murdered in the town where he lives and these murders duplicate details described in his substantially unpublished body of work; out of over 400 stories, only one has been published. In addition to the writer, his brother Michael has also been arrested. His brother, (played superbly by Matthew Maher) over the course of seven years, was subjected to such severe physical abuse by his parents during a ghastly social engineering "experiment" that he has become brain-damaged and autistic.





Over the next few hours, during several interrogations, torture and its justification, writing, child abuse, and the influence of childhood trauma upon adult foibles come into play. McDonagh's world on the stage is nasty, brutish and not nearly short enough for many.

As Tupolski says to Katchurian as the clock ticks down to "K's" assured execution, "You want to know what my 'World View' is? My World View is that life is shit. That's it: life is shit. . . "Actually maybe you cannot call that a World View, but a Point of View. . . Never mind. Fuck you. I don't care what you think. In twenty minutes you will be executed."

The "Pillowman" is one of Katchurian's short stories in which a character made entirely of pillows has the job of going back in time so as to persuade little children to commit suicide, thereby preventing in each case a life filled with horror and misery that will only end with suicide anyway as an adult. When the

Pillowman fails one time to convince a child to change its destiny, and then is cursed by the adult who regrets not having killed herself as a child, the Pillowman goes back in time to convince his own child-self to commit suicide via immolation. As the adult Pillowman fades away -- never having grown up -- he hears the screams of the thousands in agony the adult Pillowman had "saved."

As a sidebar note, pillows are what Katchurian uses to suffocate his vicious parents during his rescue of his brother, which Katchurian turns into a short story, altering some of the "facts" and effectively blending the stage "reality" with a fog of uncertainty for the audience and for the characters themselves. During the second Act, in desperation, Tupolsky grills Katcherian about time and dates so as to come up with at least one verifiable fact: Katchurian's age at the time of his parent's death. Having come up with this useless bit of information, Tupolsky writes it down, comforted for a short while.

Critics can banter back and forth all about what the play is "about." Most seem to miss the point of contemporary theater's point of evocation over meaning. It was interesting talking to fellow audience members about how much the brutal first act reminded them of certain actual situations. The most common evocation was of Abu Graib, but for the Editor, it reminded him of The Troubles, Long Kesh and its infamous H Block and the "hard men" it made, of the IRA's midnight captures and shattered knees as well as the horrific interrogations by the Armagh paramilitaries. For others it evoked the Grande Guignonol of Cescescu's horrific regime in Romania. It seems the 20th and 21st Centuries have produced this reservoir of assumptions, tropes, themes, and unfortunate

knowledge about the world from which now we borrow our sadly pained shorthand for The Times.

Arthur Koestler's jailed bureaucrat dying with his cracked head upon the concrete of a Soviet prison was the Old World and that is long history now. Forget that; John Wayne has been dead for centuries. WE live in the brave new world of lunging attack dogs and naked men piled into pyramids in the middle of a prison set in the boundaries of some conquered territory where nobody seems to know the language, not even the inhabitants any more. And you cannot blame the Nazis or the Communists for this one.



In the United States of America public discussion recent focussed upon the uses and necessity of torture. In what country has this discussion ever happened before?

When the brutal Ariel states emotionally, "When I take them into that room, put the electroshock on them and beat the bloody fuck out of them I feel good about myself. Once in a while one of them turns out to be innocent and we

let them go, but you had better believe not a single one of them will so much as lift a finger against a child in his lifetime for he knows he'll be brought back here and I'll do the same thing to them all over again!"

Would you justify torturing a child molester? Ariel takes Katcherian and forces him to kneel in front of an electro-shock machine and as he attaches the electrodes, Tupolski comes into the room to remark, "Why are you torturing him? We have his confession already."

It is revealed that Ariel has experienced child abuse himself. Hence, his irrational anger at what he thinks is the source of child pain.

In a strange way, it is the "bullish" and crude Ariel who appears to rise a bit higher in understanding over all the others as the play comes to an end, for he performs the sole act of charity and compassion, whereas the seemingly more cultured Tupolski commits the ultimate barbaric act in executing a man clearly innocent of all crimes charged and, in the process, violates even his own word of honor by shooting before the count of ten completes.

Other than a brief comic moment involving a "green pig", the play is devoid of beautiful images or higher thoughts, with the possible exception of Tupolski's story about the "Chinaman and the retarded Chinese boy", which is the only story told involving human beings that ends happily. But of course, the story is about Tupolski himself, and he would have it end that way, with the focus upon himself rather than the life saved. Each policeman does present the idea of their work somehow saving individual lives, but Ariel tortures the innocent as well

as the guilty and Tupolski executes a man clearly proven to be innocent of the crimes charged simply because the execution has been scheduled in advance.

As the New York critics have indicated, the play is largely about the artistic process and the sources from which it derives, as well as what happens when the work goes out into the world to have some effect. What is really wonderful about Irish work is the way in which what seems to be familiar and about to lead up to the conventional so often shifts aside to the unexpected. Ireland, if it seems overstating the obvious, is a place which has never experienced the upside of Empire, so the expectations and understandings are vastly different from plays written by American or English authors.

But it would be reductive to say that the play is "about" writing and its sources, or the artist's responsibility for what effects the work produces. Of course Katcherian, working by day in a slaughterhouse as a cleanup man and writing stories by candlelight at night is not the author of the horrific child murders; someone else has read his work and used it as a blueprint for child maiming and murder. It is more interesting to look at how any creative work arises out of some kind of muck and results in independently valued artwork.

Nor is the play about the relative value of writing, any writing, over any other elevated value. Such discussions are really stupid and reminiscent of nonsensical valuations thrust upon us at UCSF where some idiot would say something along the lines of "Is not the work of a doctor preserving life worth more than anything you do?!" The issue is entirely specious for of what value is preserving life if that life has no value granted? Doctors seem to know this better

than their wannabe defenders. And there are plenty of other arguments as well.

And the discussion is, ultimately, really boring.

The show ends February 25th.

Tony Amendola (Lupeski) and Les Waters (Director) will be appearing to discuss the play at the Rep 1/29/07 and it should be interesting to hear what the two have to say.

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Matthew Maher and Erik Lochtefeld perform as the brothers
Author: Oscar-winner Martin McDonagh

Tony Amendola, Andy Murray perform as the policemen