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Turning morality upside-down in 'The Possibilities'

The Boston Globe

By Thomas Garvey, Globe Correspondent | February 23, 2006

Howard Barker is probably the greatest living playwright you've never heard of, but the promising Whistler in the Dark theater company is looking to change all that with its gripping production of "The Possibilities" at the Charlestown Working Theater. The staging is bare bones and the performances sometimes only adequate, but Whistler in the Dark, despite the occasional stumble, gets the job done. "The Possibilities" is electrifying theater, quite possibly the first must-see production of 2006.

That isn't meant as a snub to the other fine work on our local stages, but in terms of theatrical impact -- and sheer guts -- "The Possibilities" easily elbows aside the competition. The British Barker has been penning his surreal extravaganzas since the '70s, but has been little staged on this side of the pond (and even less at home; he is, instead, a sensation in mainland Europe and Australia). But as our political consensus has frayed and faltered, Barker's star has risen, much like that of a forgotten prophet, for his enduring concern is individual action in a world gone mad.

"The Possibilities" has proven particularly prescient. This set of parables of power was developed in the late '80s and clearly draws from the poisoned moral well that led to the Serbian and Gulf wars. But it's hard to shake the feeling that we all now share the choices forced on Barker's characters: whether to kill, whether to torture, whether to open the door or close it, or even lock it forever and throw away the key.

Thus while these bite-size tabs of political and moral acid have often been compared to Brecht, they've been stripped of Brecht's left/right dichotomy. Barker's power plays unfold in a frightening moral vacuum, where unaccommodated man must devise his rationales on the fly, knowing the tables can turn at any moment, and fast enough to make your head spin. The playwright calls his style "The Theatre of Catastrophe," and indeed, his characters must make their choices under the most extreme conditions -- with bombs screaming down from the sky, or police pounding on the door, or a dagger just inches from the throat. The evening is only endurable because the language is almost droll in its fatalism -- one victim politely asks his killers, "May I expose the fallacy in your thinking?" -- and because Barker is constantly opening up one dazzling intellectual challenge after another.

The Whistler in the Dark actors may not have the presence to always pull off Barker's flattened rhetorical style, but their physical commitment delivers the pith of his vision. Lorna McKenzie fares best, with memorable turns as an addled bookseller and a victim of past atrocity. Brian Quint definitely goes the distance as the emperor with no clothes -- literally -- who strips down to savor the sound of his servant being whipped. Meanwhile, Andrew Winson is ghoulishly effective as the torturer who came to dinner, and Jennifer O'Connor sometimes almost embodies the chill spirit of the play, remaining clear-eyed and calculating even as she's being strangled. Her devastating cool is hard to emulate, however. You may hate "The Possibilities," but to leave it unshaken is impossible. ■

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