

jonathan siegle

'Tango' succeeds at two steps

"Tango," by Polish playwright Slawomir Mrozek, now in production by the University Theater, is three things: a social/political drama, a black comedy of convention, and a serious character piece. It succeeds at the first two.

Although written in three acts, "Tango" divides neatly in two. Acts I and II take the traditional comedy of manners and turn it on its ear. We meet Eleanor and Stomil, grandmother Eugenia and uncle Eugene, the oafish Eddie, and winsome Ala. They're all pretty batty.

Home is a sloppy, comfortable old house. They live a bohemian existence, dressing as they like, loving whenever and wherever they like, going to and fro in gentle, silly anarchy.

Enter Arthur, Stomil and Eleanor's son. He wears a grey flannel suit with a carnation in the button hole. He's studying to be a doctor. He yearns for an orderly world. A world of conventions. A world of rules.

He plans a revolution, a mad plan to

revert to the ways of old before this decadent society took over. To do this he plans a traditional wedding, with veil and music, and old fashioned vows.

It's all quite fun, if not a bit confusing, and thoroughly harmless.

Intermission. The audience stretches, chats, has a drink of water.

Act III begins, pretty much as Act II ended. Sucked in, the audience goes along with the comedy, while Mrozek takes careful aim and punches out their lights. End of comedy.

Mrozek presents poor, deluded Arthur as Average Man, seeking order in chaos. Yet Arthur, like Average Man, is unable to see shades; life is either all black and chaotic, or all white and orderly. His family goes along with him.

And in the end the order Arthur sought is revealed. It is fascism. This was not Arthur's goal. He wanted the old order, but that's not possible anymore. In the modern world the orderly extreme is not pastoral, it is totalitarian.

This is Mrozek's message. We must guard our freedom. We must be vigilant. We must be careful, lest the seekers of order chain us to their rules.

It's a timely message.

Where Mrozek fails as a playwright is in not giving his central character, Arthur, much life. As social commentary "Tango" is brilliant. As good drama, it has serious flaws.

Yet the production directed by Peter Davis manages to overcome these problems and present these people not just as symbols of political ideologies but as interesting, even sympathetic characters.

Davis lets the inherent battyness out without pointing a big finger at it. It is gratefully understated, gracefully subtle. He resists the temptation to overdo it.

The strength of this production is the cast. They need work to tighten up the ensemble acting, but this will come soon. Nevertheless, they work well together.

Mark Schwahn is a major talent, but he struggles a bit as Arthur. Schwahn's timing is perfect. At one point he takes a lovely pratfall without missing a beat. Yet he seems tense, almost nervous in the role of serious, deluded Arthur. He doesn't seem comfortable on stage. At times he talks too fast. He's holding back, perhaps in deference to the ensemble.

This isn't necessary. Arthur is the central figure. It's natural to build him up, get him out front more. If Davis is restraining him on purpose, it's an obvious strain. It's also a waste of an actor.

The supporting actors are generally strong, with some excellent performances among them.

Stephen Springston, brings the enormous free thinking artist Stomil to life with joy and warmth. His size and gravelly voice dominate when he's on, but don't overpower either.

Dennis Murphy, as Eugene, and Gretchen Woodring, as Eugenia, both establish their eccentric, dotty old characters without falling into caricature. They are effective and consistent.

Martin Steiner is excellent as the oafish Eddie. His rise to importance isn't obvious. However, it is not necessary to emphasize his mustache. Not only does the audience get the message, but it limits the focus of the drama.

Enid Clarke does her usual credible best as Ala, Arthur's almost wife. Clarke is a good actor, and carries herself well on stage. However, all her roles seem alike. She needs some variety.

This is a jarring play, a thought provoking play. Don't see it for fun. See it to be reminded how in the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed man is king.

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Editor's note

Due to a malfunction in the memory system of the Emerald's typing apparatus the et als section will not be appearing Monday. We regret any inconvenience this memory failure may cause.

Clark, death penalty repressive, a tool of racial discrimination

PORTLAND, (AP) — Former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark calls capital punishment an instrument of totalitarianism used to put down freedom.

"What you see in all of this is a contest between freedom and authoritarianism, fear and hatred and love and faith," he told a conference on the death penalty in Portland on Saturday. "To me, finally the question is: Are we killers?"

Clark told an audience of about 150 that the history of the death penalty in the United States was marked by racial discrimination. He cited what he said was a disproportionate number of blacks executed.

He called South Africa the "lord high

executioner" for carrying out roughly half the known executions in the world in the last decade. Last year, he said, the South African government executed nearly 200 people, only one of whom was white.

Clark said the penalty had been abolished in many Western European, Asian and South American nations.

A backer of the death penalty, Ernest van den Haag, a professor of jurisprudence and public policy at Fordham University in New York City, called the penalty an important symbolic issue.

He said studies provide a "preponderance of evidence" that executions will deter potential murderers.

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