

# 'Lazarus': Expressionist look at fearful society



The stage is stark, with crude, stick-like action drawings on the backdrop.

"Lazarus Laughed," by the American playwright Eugene O'Neill, was written in 1928, during the Expressionist era in art. It shows

All the characters except Lazarus wear masks, designed by Nan Hoffman. The masks are one of the high points — and disturbing features — in this play. The use of masks is the dramatic fulfillment of the Expressionist tendency to focus the eye on myriad disparate parts, which when viewed together comprise a unity. The masks are papier-mache, and represent the theme of distorted consciousness and emotion.

O'Neill was concerned with presenting a society out of touch with itself. Hence recurrent, strained laughter is employed as a mechanism to delineate the man of peace, Lazarus, from those who watch and envy him, Hebrews both common and priestly, Greeks, Romans — all blame Jesus for raising Lazarus from the dead, and all are unable to curtail his infectious, fully satisfied laughter.

Lazarus laughs, and everyone on stage begins to twitch, laugh, and grimace. For all the characters except Lazarus' wife Miriam and Mary, mother of

production, the use of electronic laughter creates an almost parapsychological effect. Lazarus' laughter might be seen as white magic, and the tabla-accented music between scenes heightens the mystical flavor.

Lazarus is the animus of the society he inhabits, and of the play. "Death! Death! Vengeance!" cry the Romans and Hebrews. Lazarus answers them by telling them for the first of several times that "All death is our invention, so laugh!"

Perhaps Lazarus' most important opponent is Caligula. It is in answer to Caligula's manic rantings and rapacious ambition that Lazarus gives us some of his most shining nuggets of philosophy.

Caligula asks Lazarus, upon Lazarus' arrival in Rome, "Tell me why I love so to kill?" Lazarus' answer is devastating: "Because you fear so much to die." Thus, Caligula represents the psychic state of all the characters except Lazarus' beloved Miriam, and Mary. In the second act, Caligula even says of Lazarus, "We must save death from him!"

After the intermission, we meet Tiberius Caesar, Caligula's degenerate uncle, and the obstacle between Caligula and the Imperial seat. Tiberius wishes to see Lazarus because he has heard that Lazarus might be able to restore his long-lost youth and vigor.

she dies, Lazarus asks Miriam to call him from beyond death's door. Eventually, after Caligula and the others think that they have beaten Lazarus — that death has won — Miriam does call him, and Pompeia knows love (or seems to) for the first time in her life. She says that she could weep for his defeat.

The production of "Lazarus Laughed" is not always evenly paced. There are places where actors' lines run over each other. In the first scene, in particular, the voices of the student actors betray the youth of the cast. Once one gets used to that, and especially when the dialogue includes the Romans, the audience can concentrate on the spiritual lessons and subtleties of the plot.

J. Richard Williams, a University professor of theater, plays Lazarus. He has a very round, mellifluous voice which contrasts sharply with the voices of every other male character in

the play.

Cole Hornaday plays several roles, including Caligula. Short, with long blond hair protruding from beneath his mask, his Caligula reminds one of Henry II's petulant son John in "The Lion In Winter" — though much more bloodthirsty.

Karen Gloege does a good, slinky job with Pompeia. Her mask shows more of her face than many of the Hoffman creations; the more the better.

Sandra Wiley has some of the most poignant lines as Miriam, especially when she is doomed to eat her last meal. She could have spoken up a little more in her final scene, in order to accentuate her entrance to life, and not her surrender to death.

Phil Dunn, as Tiberius, is sufficiently depraved, but does not sound quite old enough for the role. This is always a problem with student repertory companies, as most students are

young. You can't fault them for it.

Some people have wrongly identified "Lazarus Laughed" as a Greek tragedy. Rather, it is (or was conceived as) an existential, avant-garde vehicle for universal significances.

"Lazarus Laughed" will be playing at the Villard Hall Arena Theatre tonight and Saturday, and May 1-3. Showtime is at 8:00 p.m., and admission is \$2.50. The Arena Theatre is not large, and playgoers would do well to purchase tickets and arrive early.

Tickets may be purchased at the Robinson Theatre box office, or by calling 686-4191. The Robinson Theatre box office is open Monday through Saturday from noon to 4 p.m., and until 8:30 on performance evenings.

By William Homans

...The use of masks is the dramatic fulfillment of the Expressionist tendency to focus the eye on myriad disparate parts, which when viewed together comprise a unity....

Jesus, Lazarus' peace of mind is a threat.

Even Jesus' grandfather (Mary's father, that is) curses Jesus and Lazarus, and "the great mocking devil which laughs from his mouth." Immediately, taped laughter begins offstage, and the characters twist and contort their bodies in their desperate clinging to death.

When "Lazarus Laughed" opened at the Community Theater in Pasadena, Calif. in 1928, 400 costumes, 300 masks, and over 125 people were used. There were no tape recorders in use at the time. In this modern

We also meet Pompeia, Tiberius' manipulative mistress; she is a fit complement to Caligula, in her viciousness and chameleon-like sense of politics. Pompeia sees to it that Miriam eats poisoned food from Caesar's special plate. Miriam is the only character besides Lazarus who accepts the idea that physical death is not the end of life, and she eats it willingly, after ascertaining from Lazarus that it is alright to leave his side.

Lazarus shows that his strength is human, regardless of the miracle of new life which permits him to display it. Before

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