

# Afterlife

*Frozen* seeks answers on questionable ground

Ten words: *Fear. Anguish. Loss. Suffering. Mother. Psychopath. Neurologist. Confrontation. Healing? Freedom?*

A friend who came along with me to *Frozen* told me about her friend who reviews movies and plays in 10 words. In the spirit of his blog, I have made several attempts to sum up the Lord Leebrick's production of Bryony Lavery's 2004 Tony-nominated play.

*Terrifying topic, varied acting levels; Dan Pegoda, the villain, kills.*

This play, directed by Carol Horne, rather defines seriousness, mixing death and abuse and agonizing relationships as the three on-stage characters deliver soliloquy after soliloquy in a slow march toward something — acceptance? Persistence? Survival? Justice? Maybe all of these.

When I say Pegoda kills, I mean that his character, Ralph, murders people in the action of the play, but also that Pegoda's acting once again ratchets Eugene's theatrical community up several levels. Ralph's sincere creepiness seeps in from the opening seconds, with the discussion of a hard day's "work" and the landlady's lack of understanding of his dining preferences. The way Pegoda shows Ralph licking his lips, twitching his legs ever so slightly, never quite engaging the audience with his constantly blinking eyes — all generate a frightening portrait of an aggrieved, aggressive, disturbed man. In the second act, Pegoda's skill

even convinces the disgusted audience to give Ralph some sympathy. His virtuoso performance creeps into thoughts and dreams long after the play ends.

Like Ralph, Nancy (Ellen Chace) ages 20-plus years during the course of the play, and like Pegoda, Chace must demonstrate her character, the mother of a murdered girl, from small pieces of information and actions. Chace's strengths emerge as Nancy ages and also as Crace performs scenes with others, including an unseen daughter. Unfortunately, Chace doesn't convince as much in the long first act, partially because of costume choices. Nancy as a nervous though intelligent younger woman needs different clothes (and a different affect, from voice to hair to body movement) than the second-act Nancy, whose strength and no-nonsense determination direct the course of her emotional journey. The music playing whenever Chace took the spotlight intruded and distracted; perhaps a bit of volume control might take it more to the background and let Chace embody Nancy more fully.

The third character, neurologist Agnetha

(Storm Kennedy), only participates in the present action of the play, but she begins the entire timeline-twisted evening with what should be an overwhelmingly poignant scene. Picture the stunning performance of Judith Stevenson in *Truly, Madly, Deeply* crying without restraint — that's the kind of act-



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ing called for in this scene. The grief Agnetha feels about her own loss even as she attempts to analyze Ralph should touch the audience as well. But Kennedy seems to have excellent comic timing, which is unfortunate in *Frozen* as there's little humor in the script, including in that opening scene. The audience often didn't know whether to laugh or cry, and that's a problem Kennedy *must* address over the run of the play if she's to succeed.

This play deals with weighty issues — death, the nature of evil, the courage to confront and move through tragedy — using a tightly focused lens. Some of Lavery's script treats, a bit too lightly through that offstage daughter, forgiveness and the transformations necessary for survival after massive grief, but the playwright also wants to address responsibility. Part of the script hinges on a discussion of nature vs. nurture and whether brain damage combined with emotional abuse causes a lack of empathy. That's a scary discussion, considering the number of brain injuries incurred by soldiers in Iraq. But the answer doesn't matter, the play seems to say during an intense truth-and-reconciliation-style scene which Chace and Pegoda inhabit with profound grace. The answer doesn't matter because each person is finally responsible for her own actions, the suffering he causes, the actions she takes. And this truth, which traps Ralph in the prison he created, finally frees Nancy to pursue her own life but leaves Agnetha, seeking reassurance, desperately alone.

Opening night attendance seemed sparse, especially compared to that at other Leebrick productions this season. This play and this theater deserve better. Please reward the Leebrick for its courageous programming with your presence.

One more: *Twenty years of suffering; final statement says, "Live with it."* **EW**

*Frozen* runs through April 14. Tix available at [www.lordleebrick.com](http://www.lordleebrick.com) or 465-1506.

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