

Paralyzed Force

No climbing out of this *Mud*

Theater of the absurd requires a certain attentive engagement from its audience and a special focus from actors who are practiced in more conventional interactions. The short play *Mud* by Maria Irene Fornes, now playing in the UO's Arena Theatre, is no exception. If you're trained on a diet of Beckett and Ionesco, Stoppard and Genet, the tableaux of *Mud* will no doubt feel familiar: alienating stiffness; repetitive, stylized gestures; glassy, distant stares; the sudden, *meaningful* dousing of lights.

If you're more used to traditional scripts, then you're in for a messy challenge, one that the playwright considers necessary to modern life: confronting the way our desires, repetitive and banal, pull us back into the muck; the way our treatment of others comes back to us; the way a society divided by gender and class wounds us.

True, this sounds like the basic recipe for any contemporary drama, but the special forms and demands of absurdist theater mix content with a form so earnest and seemingly primitive that the audience experiences discomfort. This unease isn't like that of an Aristotelean tragedy where the outcome leaves one dissolved in tears but distant from the prescribed outcome; instead, the spiky, weird sentiment comes from feeling dislocated, deracinated, not precisely sure

where one belongs in relation to the unfolding situation onstage. In a recent Chicago production of *Mud*, the audience was encouraged to stand and walk around the action, which might be an excellent way to see more of the angles. But the tight intimacy of the Arena Theatre heightens the emotional quandary of how to respond. Often, people laugh at moments that simply aren't funny.

But then, how to react? There's never a tear-jerker moment because the characters aren't warm enough for us to care. The *situation* causes the agony, a situation all too close for those living in restricted circumstances where education looks like the bright light of salvation — but where a student's choices douse that flickering flame. (As a teacher, I've seen personal life issues derail dozens of attempts, usually at institutions where students have far fewer resources than most at the UO.)

The main character is Mae (Stephanie Brubaker), whose biggest dream is to "die in a hospital with clean sheets" and who's trying to take classes so she can escape a life of manual labor and the hovel where she lives with her silent brooder of an adopted brother/lover, Lloyd (Kelly Mackay). She finds Henry (Ryan Primm), who can already read, and she invites him



Henry (Ryan Primm) watches Mae (Stephanie Brubaker) and Lloyd (Kelly MacKay) argue

to share her bed in hope that he will lift her along with him. But that's not a choice she gets to make, and as for her dream — to quote *Les Miz*'s Fantine — there are some storms we cannot weather.

All of that said, how do the UO's student actors, grad student director and production team work with the formidable task placed before them? Brubaker's ebullience, cultured voice and pretty, well-cared-for face make her a tough sell as the supposedly poverty-stricken Mae, but she makes a gallant attempt to seem naïvely hopeful yet weary and occasionally manipulative. Primm's set stare, bizarre suspenders and nasal voice work poorly as Henry is introduced but well as bodily weakness befalls

the clever, vengeful, selfish man. Mackay, whose one affect is inarticulate frustration, makes Lloyd the least sympathetic character of all even before the ugly climax of the play.

The UO students and theater department, supported by a publicly funded structure that doesn't need to produce a profit in order to survive, can take risks like producing *Mud*. Sometimes those risks create uneven results, but the failures provide fertile ground for discussion and grappling with whether character truly *is* destiny.

In the end, after a nod to Chekhov, the play invokes T.S. Eliot to remind us that "between the conception / and the creation / ... Falls the Shadow."

Mud continues May 3-5 at the UO. Call 346-4363 for tix.

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