

BEDTIME STORIES

Art, truth and murder collide in LCC's production of Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman*

On the surface, Irish author Martin McDonagh's plays are foul, transgressive affairs, full of piss and vinegar and erect middle fingers. In the tradition of his literary forbears Swift, Joyce and Beckett, McDonagh is a relentlessly physical writer given to depicting all manner of human grotesquery — violence, perversion, degradation, deformity and compulsive cussing of the worst kind.

Dig beneath the surface, however, and you'll find the broken heart of an outraged moralist. In McDonagh's breakthrough play of 2003, *The Pillowman* — playing this weekend in a stellar production at Lane Community College — the stark, brutal tactics of a police interrogation provide an unlikely entrance into a complex and rather unnerving autopsy of the role of art and storytelling in society: its burdens, its dangers, its responsibilities, its threat.

In an opening reminiscent of Kafka's *The Trial*, the play kicks off with a scene of malign confusion: Katurian (Taylor Freeman), a writer whose short stories often depict violence against children, is being held in a cell and questioned by a pair of police officers, the sly and officious Tupolski (David Arnold) and the aggressive "bad cop" Ariel (Aaron Smart). Turns out several of Katurian's stories share a striking similarity with a spate of unsolved child murders in this unnamed totalitarian state.

Pulling story after story from a file box sitting on a table, Tupolski and Ariel attempt to entrap Katurian in the real-life outcome of his own artistic motivation: Did he

actually carry out the adolescent crucifixion depicted in "The Little Jesus"? Complicating matters is Katurian's feeble-minded brother Michal (Cash McAllister), sitting in the cell next door, who may or may not be complicit in the murders, and whose own history of childhood abuse played a integral, if pathological, part in the development of Katurian's artistry.

Directed by Tara Wibrew, LCC's production of *The Pillowman* is a pip. The play is stripped to its bare essentials — mostly just four men in a bare room — allowing the insidious logic of McDonagh's cat-and-mouse wordplay to punch its way around with little distraction. Thankfully, the solid cast does not try to reproduce an Irish brogue, which has the added benefit of

revealing the universal concerns of the playwright's tragicomic fable — a fable warning us that one man's cautionary tale is another man's incitement to kill.

For, ultimately, the shocking nature of McDonagh's material is pig in a poke: His means and his message are inseparable. *The Pillowman* is a sophisticated and tricky meditation on censorship and society, and it asks questions that aren't easy to answer. Is the storyteller responsible for the way stories are received? And, given the free flow of ideas, are there some among us who can't handle them — who can't differentiate fact from fiction? And who gets to decide?

The Student Production Association of Lane's production of The Pillowman plays 7:30 pm Thursday through Saturday, Nov. 19-21, at LCC's Blue Door Theatre, 4000 E. 30th Ave., 463-5648. \$10, \$5 students.



TAYLOR FREEMAN (LEFT) AND CASH MCALLISTER IN LCC'S *THE PILLOWMAN*

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