

TRAGEDIES AND STATISTICS

University Theatre's *Scorched* looks unflinchingly at the side of war we don't often see, or want to

Clocking in at nearly four hours, University Theatre's production of *Scorched* is something of an endurance test, and the stamina it requires is more than just physical. Bloody and unrelenting, the play transports the audience front and center to hell on earth, and its emotional impact is undeniable, like a seizure of post-traumatic stress that won't let you go.

Written by Wajdi Mouawad, a Lebanese-Quebecois playwright whose parents were refugees of the Lebanese Civil War, *Scorched* takes a close, almost paralyzing look at the indiscriminate cycles of violence unleashed by perpetual warfare. It follows the journey of a pair of twins, Simon (Alex Mentzel) and Janine (Mallory Oslund), as they return to their homeland in search of their father.

This journey, however, which trips through time in flashbacks revealing the nightmarish trials of their deceased mother Nawal (played at different phases by Samantha Lee, Jerilyn Armstrong and Mary Unruh), is more like a descent — a spiraling down into the profound and insidious human toll of civil war. The explosive revelation at the end of their quest reverberates like some cosmic wowl at the endless inhumanity and perversion that result from centuries of conflict and displacement (the play's original title in French was *Incendies*).

Scorched is directed by Michael Malek Najjar, whose



ALEX MENTZEL AND MALLORY OSLUND IN UT'S SCORCHED

own family was touched directly by the ongoing Mideast conflict; his mother worked in a hospital during the 1958 crisis in Beirut, and his Lebanese-born wife experienced the terrors of shelling as a child. Such intimate knowledge of nationalist violence informs Najjar's helming of this production, which draws the audience into its claustrophobic grip — seats in the Hope Theatre are pulled so close they dissolve the fourth wall, and it feels as though you are a participant in the chaos. When a gun goes off, you jump. You see the blood ooze down the wall.

And that, in a sense, is the point, and the importance of this play. It gives a face and a name and a voice to those faraway statistics — those almost daily body counts — to which we risk growing numb. In *Scorched*, the effects of such violence are immediately discernable at a very

personal level, as individuals are forced to respond to the atrocities surrounding them, sometimes monstrously.

At times, the show meanders into strange territory, and it's not always effective; the playwright's exhaustive efforts to bring home the violence lead him into artsy passages of fantasia and poetry that tend to jam up the narrative momentum.

More often than not, however, the production is riveting. As a piece of confrontational theater, *Scorched* is fearless in its determination to gaze without flinching at the wages of war. It is difficult to behold, and dangerous to ignore. — Rick Levin

Scorched runs through March 13 at UO's Hope Theatre; tickets and info at 346-4363.

MURDER ON THE MENU

With perfect political timing, a new dinner theater company brings *Murder on the Campaign Trail* to town

The newly minted Mystery Mayhem Theater Company's dinner show, *Murder on the Campaign Trail*, opens in Springfield this weekend, with a sendup of the political process and whodunit rolled into one.

The show's co-producer, Tony Stirpe, cut his teeth on shows like this.

"I had been a working actor in Phoenix, Arizona for many years," Stirpe recalls. "It's not one of America's cultural centers, but I managed to make a living doing children's theater by day and Murder Mystery Dinner Theatre on weekend evenings."

Flash forward almost five years and Stirpe, a regular performer on Eugene stages, recognized a satiric void. "And now I'm just trying to plug it with a bit of what I know best," he says.

Stirpe's partner in crime, fellow actor Blake Beardsley, shares his vision.

"I grabbed Blake and dragged him along with this lunacy," Stirpe says, laughing. "We've built the company, Mystery Mayhem, together — and from scratch. And in a very short amount of time."

Stirpe wrote the show's script over a long weekend, he says. And both men wear many hats.

"Blake appears as Max Sebastian, campaign manager to Thomas Jerry, running to be the first Third Senator from Oregon. And I'm directing as well as stage managing the shows," Stirpe says.

Mystery Mayhem promises a high level of audience interaction.

"This is environmental theater," Stirpe says. "There is no stage and there is no proverbial 'fourth wall.' The audience has been invited to a campaign rally and until tragedy strikes, that's exactly what they get. By the end of the night they'll be asked to help solve the crime and win a prize in the process."

The performance roster will change over time, Stirpe says, and the producers have double-cast many of the roles in anticipation of a long run.

"As we open, Blake will be joined by the great Bill Campbell as Thomas Jerry, and Jennifer Sellers as his wife," Stirpe says. "We also have Hailey Henderson as the intrepid journalist. Later, Kathy LaMontagne and Roxanne Fox will join the cast."

Tickets include a full dinner (with a vegetarian option) and the venue features that most important inside-the-Beltway landmark: the open bar.

It's only March, and many of us already suffer from election fatigue. So as the wangling of this pivotal year ensues, Stirpe is hoping the show taps into our collective need for a cathartic release.

"Satire is most important in an election year," Stirpe says. "If for no other reason than to remind us that there's supposed to be a difference between comedy and politics."

Mystery Mayhem Theater Co.'s *Murder on the Campaign Trail* runs 7 pm Fridays and Saturdays, March 12-April 30, at the Holiday Inn in Springfield, 919 Kruse Way. For tickets, visit MysteryMayhem.biz or call 844-1450; \$39 (including dinner.)

— Rachael Carnes



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