

Sennett: “The Internationalist” – a review

I frequently walked in on Professor Caitlyn Tella conducting rehearsals for “The Internationalist.” Other times I have intruded on her instructing a small but eccentric group of theatre students on the subtleties of improvisation. I am usually trying to quietly pass through, so as not to interrupt their strange dances, conversations and screams, to make my way up to the film projection booth, which is located inside their rehearsal space.

As I shut the door behind me to resume my endeavors with celluloid, I always pause and reflect on the absurdities bellow.

Needless to say, when it finally came time for Tella’s directorial debut here at the University of Toledo, my curiosity was in desperate need of quenching. Perhaps it was appropriate for Tella to adapt one of Anne Washburn’s plays. Her work is always fresh, contemporary and blurs the conventional borderlines of theatre.

The 2012 satire of modern American culture and communication, “Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play” tackles the simple but frightening concept of what would happen if electricity vanished from America overnight.

Episodes of “The Simpsons” would become objects of folklore and the popular music of Lady Gaga would morph into historical hymns. When it comes to Washburn, audiences rest in an uncomfortable silence during intermissions; they are forced to consider themselves and their habits. Or at least that was my experience with “Mr. Burns” when I saw it in Louisville a few years ago.

An earlier Washburn play, “The Internationalist” (2004) has

just been wrapped by the University of Toledo's Department of Theatre and Film.

This work takes place in an unnamed foreign country, where everything is just slightly different from America. A businessman from the U.S. is sent abroad to work in an ambiguous office building for an equally ambiguous reason. If it was to be anything like "Mr. Burns," I knew I would not be in for the typical narrative, not to mention Tella's knack for evoking a haunting atmosphere every time I invade her rehearsal space.

When I sat down to watch the play, I casually noticed the preshow music. It was an instrumental, maybe a cello or a viola, bowing a familiar tune. It sounded classical, but it was Hendrix – "Purple Haze" to be precise. Like with "Burns," the theatre space was already adapting the modern, pop culture into a translated form. This created a subconscious tone that was disconnected from the familiar.

Stephen Caldwell and Stephen Sakowski should be given partial credit for evoking the eerie tone through their strong sound and lighting design. Tella directed many pregnant pauses within her show which were filled by ambient sounds and a "foreign" lighting pattern, as Tella notes in her director's statement.

I find it effective when plays and films are bold enough to trust moments of silence. Washburn wrote clever dialogue, delivered sharply by leads Victoria Zajac and Carter Makiewicz. Much of that dialogue is even written in a faux-foreign language, but the cast was able to make it flow naturally.

Tella's atmospheric direction melded perfectly with Washburn's familiar yet otherworldly text. She had the insight not to place all her emphasis on the words from the page and instead force her audience to consider blank stares from her actors.

Tella has a way of abandoning me in a sea of raw human instinct. The pauses sent me back to my disorienting, awkward moments of interruption where my words had no power and my body language meant everything.

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