



AUDITORIUM

I BELIEVE IN THE GOD OF CARNAGE



★★★★

Yasmina Reza's God of Carnage

Krudttønden | That Theatre Company | Copenhagen

directed by Harry Burton

A few years ago that master satirist Yasmina Reza proposed being a disciple – if not the deity – of a new genre: ‘funny tragedy’. If Marx was right about history repeating itself, first as tragedy then as farce, then this pile-up of genre seems a logical progression. And there’s nothing more tragically funny than the call to arms of those who cry “think of the children,” when in fact what they mean is “think of me.”

Reza is of course not the first to offer up sidewalk lemonade from this bittersweet fruit. From Zeus and Hera’s squabbling in Greek mythology to *The Slap* by Christos Tsiolkas, the theme of feuding parents using their children as sticks & shields is a rich one. Yet this Scandinavian première of Reza’s *God of Carnage* excels in particular thanks to the deft wit with which it applies the microcosm. If children are innocents then why do we so easily demonize the offspring of others? If harmony is our default state then why are we drawn to drama? If we are dedicating our life to Darfur, how can we give two damns about our clafoutis?

And so the play begins, with two sets of parents, Veronica and Michael, Alan and Annette. Their sons have been involved in an altercation that has

left two teeth loose on the floor. At Veronica and Michael’s home they civilly draw up a contract to resolve the matter. Their abode abounds with Sara Mathilde’s stick-thin African figures, a clever touch here – surrounding the replete with images of the famished. Yellow tulips wilt on the table in a limp offering of placidity that will soon be strewn. The simple design of the stage transforms the humble black box of Østerbro’s Krudttønden into an ample apartment, cleverly utilizing a Whose Line Is It Anyway-style of fluidity, with only enough chairs for three of the four to be sat at any given time. The infamous clafoutis leads to coffee, to rum, to geysering vomit: a deliquescent trajectory aptly mirrored by the deterioration of tone.

The acting here is very fine indeed, and each twist of tension is attended to artfully by director Harry Burton’s steady hand. The obvious temptation would be to foreshadow the carnage with childish physicality. In fact the performances are deliciously animalistic, highlighting Alan’s later declamation, “I believe in the god of carnage. The god whose rule’s been unchallenged since time immemorial.” Sira Stampe’s Annette may begin the play swaddled like a tortoise in a shell of designer attire, but by the end she is teetering fantastically like a giraffe calf let loose in a florists. Adam Brix as Alan is suavely reptilian, one eye on business, the other coldly amused by the undulating chaos. Seemingly affable wholesaler Michael, expertly played by veteran of London’s West End Ian Burns, is a grimacing hangdog, all nods and belly-pats till his teeth are bared and the play’s biggest bigot is unleashed. And in Veronica Katrin Weisser gives us a fastidious Germanic hawk, ready to swoop on anything other than an admission of total culpability from the other party. Together the company let loose the drama with the hurtling inevitability of a runaway cart, picking up pace and smashing through diplomatic barricades. Yet even as they reach the terminal velocity of their animosity, as in Sartre’s Huis Clos, they seem incapable of leaving one another: they are hell-bent on answering the unsolvable question of how do we live with one other without killing each other.

Ostensibly the piece shouldn’t work: there is no reasonable protagonist to root for. These are highly disagreeable characters, none more so than the men, who break out homophobic slights and racial slurs as if laying down a winning hand they were hiding all along. Both playwright and performers overcome this by making the unseen children the heroes: suddenly a hockey stick seems a rather humane way of keeping the peace.

If Reza’s play were merely bourgeoisie character assassination it would fail. It succeeds so brilliantly because – along with the actors’ supreme play of ensemble, a ping pong match of scorching words, teams constantly revolving along gender and marital lines – it strips them of their stuffy civility and invigorates them with a vital life force which, barbaric as it may be, offers far more humanity than hypocrites sipping espresso.

With the semi-lawless free-town of Christiania a mere stroll across the water, Copenhagen seems the perfect place to stage this battle between the wild and the well-heeled. That Theatre Company clearly have their teeth sunk into the times, and judging by this will be providing us with many a feeding frenzy to come.

Rowan Munro

photos | © Sarah Coghill: White Light Gallery

OTHER ITEMS



UNLEASHING YOUR INNER ZOMBIE

Einstein on the Beach, forty years on...



SEX, DRINKS & LEOTARDS

★★★★

Cavalli's La Calisto Bavarian State Opera | Munich Ivor Bolton | David Alden David...



ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT GOLD

★★

Strictly Ballroom Sydney Lyric Theatre Music Elliott Wheeler | Book Baz Luhrmann & Craig Pearce Lyrics Sia Furler,...