

Yale Rep Stages "Field Guide" To 2018

by JASON FITZGERALD | Feb 5, 2018 12:22 pm

[Post a Comment](#) | [E-mail the Author](#)

Posted to: [Arts & Culture](#), [Theater](#), [Downtown](#)



In the opening scene of *Field Guide* — at the [Yale Repertory Theatre](#) now until Feb. 17 — a young woman delivers a series of awkward jokes in a standup routine that is more of a meta routine. Among the “jokes” is the announcement that she owns no property and is about to lose both her health insurance and her income stream.

In light of this revelation, her mock standup, and much of the performance that follows it, resembles an exercise in playful cynicism. Hannah speaks for a generation that has become adult in an America uninterested in protecting its former children, for whom an adaptive strategy is to hurl droll comedy into the void.

Many of the sequences that follow — giant boxes dance awkwardly to a childish tune, a shy bear takes his own stab at joke-telling, the company enters in the white coats of Arctic explorers — are in this mold, a hallmark of the Austin-based ensemble company [Rude Mechs](#), which for over 20 years has been making an art out of awkwardness. Their achievement has been to root exuberant irony in an existential search for meaning and purpose.

No wonder, then, that the Mechs should have finally stumbled upon *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky’s 1880 magnum opus on exactly those subjects. Commissioned by the Yale Repertory Theatre and now receiving its world premiere, *Field Guide* is not so much a stage adaptation as a staged conversation between the Mechs and the novel, which they have wrestled into a modern scripture for a bleak age. While the play will likely irk Dostoevsky purists, it manages, without stooping to timely references, to replant the Russian master’s search for faith in a godless age within the landscape of the 21st century.

The novel, and therefore the skeletal plot of *Field Guide*, centers on brothers Dmitri, Alyosha, and Ivan, who respectively root themselves in the worlds of materialism, Christianity, and intellectualism. For different reasons, each has a tense relation with his difficult father Fyodor, who eventually succumbs to patricide. Lana Lesley plays Dmitri with a restless petulance (and the only Russian accent onstage) that is tiring — until the actor turns on a dime and reveals a chilling desperation. As she sits on her knees, begging Dmitri’s father for the money he needs to live the life he wants, Lesley’s quiet intensity, with her back to the audience, made me embarrassed to witness such a naked confrontation.



Similarly Mari Akita, a dancer and performance artist joining the Mechs for this production, plays Alyosha with an exasperated, holier-than-thou quietude that often disappears into the scenery — until she is given the stage for a lengthy dance (presumably choreographed by her, with music by Graham Reynolds). Like a mechanical doll being manipulated by a cruel master, Akita twists her body in parallel with Alyosha's contorted soul, as though she is subjecting herself to a higher power that may not reward her loyalty. It is a scorching spiritual reckoning.

Of the three siblings, only Thomas Graves, as Ivan, is denied such a moment of vulnerability. He plays the brother as a pretentious intellectual who quotes Hegel and Nietzsche and tells elaborate stories (including one about a Grand Inquisitor) to impress others with his erudition. Graves, tall and bearded with fiery eyes, is a talented comic actor and easily the most charismatic member of the company, so his scenes are consistently fun to watch. But one wonders what his Ivan would say if forced into a moment of total honesty. His steely composure and exaggerated imperiousness nonetheless balance Lowell Bartholomee's boorish, delightfully crude Fyodor, whose callous takedown of one of Alyosha's spiritual mentors stands in for the modern disenchantments that give *Field Guide* its urgency.



It is the play's unprepared-for moments of emotional exposure that reflect the lesson the company has taken from Dostoevsky, the courage to face their disappointments without the comfort of detachment. Lesley's Dmitri, as the most modern of the brothers, makes this point, and so becomes the conscience of the play, in his final two scenes. In the first, standing in lonely exile amidst the Siberian snow, Lesley looks to the ceiling and asks, "Why is there poverty?" It links Hannah's and Dmitri's worlds in one wrenching swipe. In the second, a child's game that Hannah had described as "ironic" takes over the stage in a memorable coup d'theatre. Lesley leaps into it with the ferocity of a prisoner raging against her circumstances, a gesture of startling sincerity that might just be

worthy of Dostoevsky — and of 2018.

Field Guide runs through Feb. 17 at Yale Repertory Theatre, 1120 Chapel Street. For tickets and more information, click [here](#) or call (203) 432-1234.

Tags: [Yale Repertory Theatre](#), [Rude Mechs](#), [Field Guide](#)