

Yale Rep's new 'Field Guide' boils down 1,000 pages into one imaginative play

By E. Kyle Minor

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If only the Rude Mechs theater ensemble was around during school days of yore. Oh, the time saved, ulcers spared and teeth ungnashed, as students tried reading Great Novels such as “The Brothers Karamazov,” Fyodor Dostoevsky’s masterpiece concerning patricide as it explored morality, free will and the existence of a supreme deity.



Had we all simply watched a performance of “Field Guide,” the Rude Mechs theater piece inspired by Dostoevsky’s 1880 tome, fate would’ve undoubtedly exchanged our collective anxiety over trudging through 1,000 pages of dark, verbal thicket for 80 minutes of theatrical clarity and genuinely imaginative physical expression.

“Field Guide,” which opened in its world premiere Thursday at Yale Repertory Theatre and continues through Feb. 17, is

simultaneously faithful to its source material while seeming to approach it irreverently. It’s easy to imagine Dostoevsky rolling in his grave as the Rude Mechs include stand-up comedy, a dancing monk and a bounce house among its centerpieces in “Field Guide.”

Yet the Rude Mechs, a 22-year-young collective based in Austin, Texas, do tell the story of Fyodor (Lowell Bartholomee), the pater familias, and his legit sons — Ivan (Thomas Graves), Alyosha (Mari Akita), and Dmitri (Lana Lesley) — as well as Smerdyakov (Robert S. Fisher), his illegitimate son and Grushenka (Hannah Kenah, who also plays Katya and Grigory), a hard-luck fellow who, bereft of his own children, has helped raise Fyodor’s sons as his own.

Fyodor, as we see him in “Field Guide,” is essentially the same oafish character as in Dostoevsky’s novel, only painted in (much) fewer, equally broad strokes. His insouciance is made plain by his ribbing of the sons about their parentage, and his indifference to the certainty of which of his two wives bore them. No wonder all three

bear a grudge and have reason to send him to the afterlife so ol' Pops can learn sooner rather than later whether or not God awaits with open arms on The Other Side.

Speaking of bears, before long a very kindly brown bear gets into the act. This gentle creature follows Kenah, who opens "Field Guide" with a somewhat existential stand-up routine, with his own curious turn behind the microphone. While Kenah seems to have tailored her act for the Stoics, this unnamed bear (voiced by an uncredited, somewhat high-pitched, brow-beaten actor) bares his soul, which has been ravaged to flinders by father issues. As outrageously funny as this shtick is, steeped in incongruity, the scene evolves into the most emphatically human moment of "Field Guide."

Akita provides another sublime (extended) moment toward the latter portion of the play as she renders Alyosha's unspoken character in dance. Accompanied by Graham Reynolds' original music, this contemplative turn exemplifies Rude Mechs' signature style of graceful, nonverbal expression. As beautiful as Akita's dance is, scenic designer Eric Dyer's set pieces perform their own dance as they transition seamlessly from innocuous furnishings into a hot tub (the Rude Mechs fidelity to their antique source material doesn't include its unity of time). It's Ernie Kovacs, Mummenschanz and Aardman Animation rolled in one.

Under Shawn Sides' fanciful direction, with Kenah responsible for the text, the cast renders "Field Guide" in uniform poker face. The actors deliver their words dryly, yet duly energized to suggest that, Russian clouds of gray be damned, they are happy to be here. It proves wise that the actors understate their lines and allow Kenah's text and Sarah Woodham's costumes (which merge period precision with cartoon simplicity), supply the hyperbole.

Not too long ago, Yale Rep audiences watched Elevator Repair Service perform "Arguendo," a play adapted verbatim from a 1991 Supreme Court case's transcript. Consider Rude Mechs the surreal, funhouse inversion of this operating procedure. This collective offers a very different, deliriously imaginative rendition of its chosen source material. Indeed, "Field Guide" should be required viewing for all college world literature classes presently mandating that students read "The Brothers Karamazov." Enrollment will flourish.